

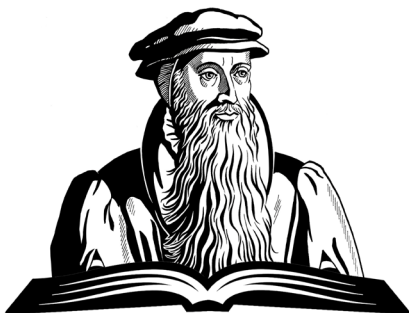
# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

## Video Lecture Series

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

### *Module 5*

## SOTERIOLOGY— THE DOCTRINE OF SALVATION



The John Knox Institute  
of Higher Education

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*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

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# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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## *Module 5 ~ Lecture 1*

### **Introduction**

Which is worth more: a container of water, or a container full of gold coins? I suspect that you'll say the latter—the gold coins. Water is inexpensive or free, because there's lots of it, and it's easy to obtain, whereas gold is rare and more valuable to most people. But what we value can change with our context. For example, what if you were stranded in the desert without any water for two days, and you came across someone with a container of water. Well, you have no other access to water, and your life depends on getting it. In such circumstances, most people would gladly exchange all their gold for that container of water.

The natural man focuses on his body, and ignores his soul. Unbelievers place great value on the perishing things of this world, and give little thought to the worth of their soul. In Mark 8, verses 36 and 37, Jesus said, “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” When the Holy Spirit begins to work in a sinner—convicting them of sin, exposing their desperate circumstances, showing the weight of eternity, and the judgment to come—everything they value begins to change. Now they value the salvation of their soul more than anything else in the entire world. God's provision of redemption, to reconcile sinners to himself becomes beautiful and of the greatest worth to them. Who can estimate the worth of the salvation of a single soul?

This series of seven modules, or courses, takes us through an introductory study of Systematic Theology. In the opening lectures of the first module, we provided an overview of the scope and purpose of these seven courses. The first module covered First Principles, or the Doctrine of Scripture. The second module covered the Doctrine of God. The third module addressed the Doctrine of Man, and the fourth module explored the Doctrine of Christ. The scope of this fifth module explores what the Bible teaches about salvation.

What we learned from Scripture about God leads us to a right understanding of man, and true knowledge of man's condition demonstrates his need for Christ—all that Christ is, all that he's done. Christ's person and work secures salvation for God's elect people. Well, what does that salvation include? Well, if you wish to gain a deeper understanding of salvation, these lectures aim to benefit you.

The lectures in this fifth module on the Doctrine of Salvation are, like the others, introductory, not exhaustive, and they're intended to furnish you with a foundation that you can build upon in your further studies. As you'll recall from the first module, theology, broadly defined, has to do with the study of the knowledge of God, and all that he has revealed for us to believe and do. We noted that it is the doctrine of living unto God through Christ, thus addressing both our thinking and our living. The Doctrine of Salvation, therefore, is an indispensable component to Systematic

Theology. We'll learn, for example, about union with Christ, effectual calling, regeneration, faith and repentance, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, and assurance. But in this first lecture, we'll consider a general introduction to the doctrine.

And so, we'll begin, as we always do, by considering a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the Doctrine of Salvation. We read in Romans 8, verse 30, "Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified." Romans 8 opens with the truth that there is no condemnation for those in Christ, and it closes with the assertion that there is no separation from the love of God in Christ. In the section before verse 30, Paul is addressing the need that God's people have for encouragement and support in their earthly sufferings, adversities, and trials. He points to the hope of glory that is to come, and God's purposes of love in the present. He goes on in verses 28 and 29 to point to the eternal counsel of God. His purpose, as verse 28 says, is explained by his foreknowledge and predestination, as we see in verse 29. And that foreknowledge and predestination we explored in the second module on Systematic Theology. Verse 30 shows how God's eternal predestination is brought to pass in time, in the life of his redeemed people, through calling, justification, and glorification.

We can think of God's salvation of the elect as planned, purchased, and applied—planned, purchased, and applied. The plan is seen in his predestination—God's plan. The purchase is seen in Christ's atonement, his coming, and the work that he carries out to atone for the sins of his people. The application is seen in sinners being brought to Christ and reconciled to God. Paul speaks of the application of salvation in the words that we see in verse 30—calling, justification, and glorification. Notice that all three are divine actions. God calls, God justifies, God glorifies, just as God predestines.

Well, we also see that there is an order—called, justified, glorified. In other words, verse 30 describes a sequence in the application of salvation. Here he only mentions three of the elements, but this abbreviated list touches high points in the salvation of sinners. God calls a person before he justifies him, and he justifies a person before he glorifies him. The calling is first in order, and glorification, which belongs to the future, comes last in the application of salvation. Justification, featured in the middle, follows calling, and precedes glorification. So this principle of order or sequence will become important in what we will consider later in this lecture.

Well, this introduces us to the overarching Doctrine of Salvation. We'll build on what we learn in Romans 8, verse 30, and set forth the big picture of how the various components of the Doctrine of Salvation fit together.

So secondly, we will consider a doctrinal exposition of this introductory material. In *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 8, paragraph 8, we read these words: "To all those for whom Christ hath purchased redemption, he doth certainly and effectually apply and communicate the same, making intercession for them, and revealing unto them, in and by the word, the mysteries of salvation; effectually persuading them by his Spirit to believe and obey; and governing their hearts by his word and Spirit, overcoming all their enemies by his almighty power and wisdom, in such manner and ways as are most consonant to his wonderful and unsearchable dispensation." The word "salvation" presupposes that we need to be delivered from something, and it's true. We need to be delivered, or saved, from sin. We need to be delivered, or saved, from hell. In a sense, we need to be delivered, or saved, from God, that is, the punishment of God's wrath. And the Bible uses many words to describe salvation as a whole. It will speak of redemption—the idea of God buying back a people for himself. It will speak of reconciliation—those who were alienated,



God and the sinner, being brought from enemies to friendship and fellowship. It speaks of deliverance—being delivered from sin, and hell, and so on. All of these are examples of words that describe salvation as a whole.

But you should note that in *Westminster Confession*, chapter 8, paragraph 8, which we quoted, notice that it distinguishes “redemption accomplished” on one hand, and “redemption applied” on the other. The former, “redemption accomplished,” or “purchased,” as the Confession says, refers to what was covered in Module 4, that series of lectures on the person and work of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, coming to atone for the sins of his people, his work both in his humiliation and exaltation. And he did so through his incarnation, crucifixion, his death and burial, his resurrection and ascension, his giving of his Spirit. This decisive work of Christ in redemptive history is the distinct act upon which the individual’s salvation rests. All of this refers to the redemption accomplished by Christ. Redemption applied refers to the individual sinner being brought into a state of salvation. Now this is important. It marks the transition from Christ’s work for us, to Christ’s work in us. So that the first, Christ’s work for us, is outside of the believer in the past, what Christ did. The second is inside the believer, Christ’s work in us. So the historical accomplishment of Christ’s redemption is final and not repeated—he’s gone to heaven. But it is applied in the life history of individual believers over and over throughout time. And this constitutes part of his ongoing work. So, in this series of lectures, which is entitled, “The Doctrine of Salvation,” we will be focusing on redemption applied—the application of salvation; the benefits that flow from what Christ purchased in his work of redemption. So that’s an important distinction and clarification.

Furthermore, the Bible teaches that the application of salvation to a sinner consists of several elements. So for example, their effectual calling, their regeneration, their conversion, their justification, their sanctification, perseverance, and more. And so, in considering the application of salvation as a whole, we should begin by understanding how these various components fit together. As we noted earlier, in Romans 8, the Bible teaches an order, or a logical sequence, in which sinners receive salvation from God. Theologians call this the “order of salvation.” The Latin phrase is *ordo salutis*—order of salvation. This is the temporal order, or the order in time, of causes and effects through which salvation comes to the sinner. And so the question is, What is the order? What is the order that the Bible teaches? And the Biblical and Reformed answer is the following. You may want to write this down. Each of these are components of the application of salvation.

So the sequence is, first of all, calling—the calling of the elect. Secondly, that’s followed by regeneration—the regeneration of the elect. After regeneration comes faith and repentance. Faith and repentance are two sides of one coin, if you will. So when we speak of conversion, conversion consists of two things: faith and repentance. So calling is followed by regeneration, which is followed by faith and repentance. And after that, in the order of sequence, comes justification—the justification of God’s people. After that comes adoption, and then next, we have sanctification, and then lastly, the glorification of God’s people, which happens at the consummation at the end of history. So this is an order or sequence in which salvation is applied to the individual believer.

Now we saw in Romans 8, verse 30, an abbreviated summary of this order or sequence—there were just three things: calling, justification, and glorification. But in considering the rest of the Bible, we can begin to put some of the other pieces together. So for example, regeneration precedes faith—it comes before faith. God brings, he regenerates a sinner before they believe. In Ephesians 2, verse 1, it says, “And you hath he quickened”—or made alive—“who were dead in trespasses and sins.” Well, dead men can’t believe. Dead men can’t do anything that is spiritually good, as we see in 1 Corinthians 2, verse 14 and following. And so, in regeneration, God comes, and he

takes away the heart of stone, and he gives unto the sinner a heart of flesh, and he renews their wills. We must be “born again”—which is part of regeneration—in order to believe. Regeneration is the commencement of all saving grace in us. Faith signifies the first exercise of the gracious disposition implanted in regeneration. As we see in 1 John, being born of God produces fruit—1 John 3, verse 9; chapter 2, verse 29; chapter 4, verse 7; chapter 5, verses 4 and 18; and we could give many other examples. So here, we’re seeing that, yes, there is a sequence—regeneration has to come before faith.

And then next, we learn that faith must precede justification. Well, why is that? Well, because the Bible says we’re justified by faith. We learn that all the way back in Genesis 15, verse 6; we see it in Galatians 2, verse 16; or you can read all of Galatians 3, or Romans 4. Faith is clearly a prerequisite to justification, in the sense that it is the instrument by which we receive Christ’s imputed righteousness. So you have to have faith in order to lay hold of and rest upon Christ for justification. So the Bible’s teaching us faith comes before justification. Similarly, John 1, verse 12 teaches us that faith is prior to adoption as well, and for similar reasons.

Next, we can learn that justification precedes, or comes before, sanctification. So justification is an act of God’s free grace. It is a one time, never repeated act that God does, in bringing a sinner into a position of acceptance and access before God, through imputing his righteousness—Christ’s righteousness—to him, among other things. Sanctification is an ongoing work of God’s grace and Spirit, which takes the justified believer and conforms them more and more in the likeness of Jesus Christ. In sanctification, the believer is dying unto sin and living unto righteousness. The Holy Spirit is transforming them in their spiritual maturity. And so sanctification is built upon justification. Sanctification flows from justification. You have to be, first of all, justified before God, prior to being sanctified and the work of sanctification ensuing. We’ll discuss this more when we come to the individual lectures on these doctrines, because conflating or confusing justification with sanctification results in terrible errors, as we’ll learn later in this course.

Glorification must come last. Why? Well, it’s pretty obvious. Glorification is still in the future, whereas all the others take place within time, in this present world—calling, and regeneration, faith and repentance, justification, adoption, and sanctification. Those all take place in this world. And so, as we saw in Romans 8, verse 30, glorification comes, in the sequence of salvation, it comes last.

Well, this is merely an introduction—an overview. In future lectures, we’ll consider many other passages in conjunction with each of these particular doctrines that we’ve touched on briefly here. The point is, in this introduction, to establish in our minds this big picture, overarching picture, of how the various components fit together.

Lastly, under the doctrinal consideration, we should underline the fact that the purpose of salvation is ultimately the glory of God. Now salvation results in great good for the individual soul, and that can be seen clearly in many ways, but the ultimate purpose isn’t really about man. The ultimate purpose is about God himself. God glorifying God. God glorifies himself in the redemption, reconciliation, deliverance, salvation of his own people. This is why, for example, the Bible says that all of the angelic beings in heaven rejoice over the repentance of a single sinner. God is fetching glory for himself. He’s showing his majesty whenever he comes and snatches a sinner as a brand from the fire, and draws them unto himself, forgives their sin, and reconciles them unto himself—God is showing his glory in those things. And so God has purchased, accomplished redemption, and applies that redemption, in order to magnify his own praise.

Thirdly, we can consider this polemically, and there are just a few things that we’ll note here.

First of all, we need to see the importance of striking the right Biblical balance. So we talked about the difference between redemption accomplished and redemption applied. For example, ministers can be guilty of the error of preaching only redemption accomplished, without redemption applied. The same thing can be true in terms of individual Christians and their thinking. And so all of the emphasis falls on past history—what the Lord has done in his incarnate ministry, and work of atonement, and so on—without speaking about the present benefit—how a sinner actually appropriates all that Christ has accomplished, how it becomes relevant in terms of their own possession of salvation. So you think, by way of example, a scientist, and they spend all of this time and effort, and they discover a cure for a terrible disease. Something important has been accomplished, but if it stays in their laboratory, and the information isn't shared with others, or more particularly, if that information isn't taken and then put to use, in terms of producing medicine or whatever, so that the cure can actually be taken to people that are dying of the disease, so that they take it and are healed or recovered, physically restored, then what's the point? And so we have to be careful not just to preach redemption accomplished, without emphasizing what the Bible teaches about how it's applied. But likewise, we can do the reverse. I said we need to strike the balance, because you can also be preaching all of the time, or thinking all the time about the application of redemption, without the accomplishment of redemption. So if we're speaking about the conversion of the soul, and everything is focused upon how a person is brought to faith, and the work of the Spirit in regenerating, and the place of repentance, and justification by faith, and so on and so forth, and that occupies or preoccupies all of the focus, without preaching Christ, and without preaching his person and work, all that he has done, preaching Christ crucified, the significance of the cross, all that he has secured for needy sinners, then you end up being in a terrible mess as well. And so there has to be both of these things held together. It's an error to emphasize one without the other.

Secondly, in considering this polemically, we spoke about the Biblical and Reformed view of the order of salvation. By way of contrast, Arminian theology, over against Reformed theology, makes some fatal mistakes. So the Arminian order of salvation would be, first of all, universal grace, then calling, then faith and repentance, then justification, then regeneration, then sanctification, perseverance, and glorification. Evangelical Lutherans have a similar, though different, order of salvation. But I want to highlight one thing here for the sake of emphasis at this juncture. In both cases—the Arminian, Evangelical Lutheran, and others—they put faith before regeneration. This is a problem, a significant problem Biblically. So that they're saying that a person believes, and that by believing, they are then made born again, they are given a new birth, born from above, renewed. That is inverting what the Bible says. It's saying that a dead man has the ability to believe, and that after believing, he then gets a new nature. That's turning things on its head, and it has all sorts of catastrophic consequences theologically and Biblically. And so, I'm highlighting this to give you an example of why the order is important. And when we come to individual lectures on regeneration, faith, and so on, we will consider that in greater detail. So that's an error that we need to be alert to and confront polemically.

Thirdly, we need to beware of the error of displacing the centrality of the gospel in preaching, and in church life, and in the individual's experience. How does the kingdom of God advance in the world? It advances through the conversion of sinners. So, if in preaching, or in church, or in an individual's life, if they begin to become focused on other things, they're derailed, their diverted from the path that's right. So the focus Biblically is not on cultural transformation. The emphasis for the advance of the kingdom doesn't take place in cultural transformation, but through the preaching of the gospel, and the conversion of sinners. Now, cultural transformation comes as a



byproduct of that, as sinners are converted, and as they're disciplined in the things of God, and as they grow in grace, and as they carry out their gifts in the various locations that they have, there will be an impact upon society as a whole. But to put the byproduct first as the aim, is to put the cart before the horse. We can't displace the centrality of the gospel in preaching. There is a need for evangelistic preaching to the congregation. Every congregation is comprised of a mixed multitude. We don't view the congregation as everybody being born again—everybody having saving faith. There's a mix in every congregation, and we need to be pressing the need for individual salvation in our pulpits, and in the congregation, in the family, and so on—the centrality of the gospel, the application of salvation.

Fourthly, we can draw some practical applications to ourselves, briefly. We noted earlier that there is a tie between salvation and interest in the glory of God. Shorter Catechism, question 1, says that "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." Well, if our chief end—our primary purpose—is to glorify God, and if the way in which God gets glory is chiefly through the salvation of sinners, then we need to have a great interest, not only in our own salvation, but in the salvation of those that are around us, and beyond. The believer's heart throbs for God and his glory, and that deepens within our souls love and appreciation for the Doctrine of Salvation. What is our greatest need? What do we value most in this world? That question may not be easy to answer. We have to examine ourselves and think about what it is that we need most and value most. But when we are in a place that we should be spiritually, we will prize these doctrines. So all the doctrines we're going to be covering in this course will be absolutely beautiful. We'll see the need to seek the one thing needful, as the Lord says, and we'll value these doctrines for ourselves and for others. It has the impact of causing us to marvel at God's provision in his free and sovereign grace. Look at all he has accomplished, yes. Look at all that he applies to the individual soul, how each of these components—our calling, our regeneration, our faith, repentance, and justification, adoption—each of them meets the precise needs of our souls. It should lead us to marvel and to worship him.

Lastly, the practical application of the priority of evangelism and missions; this flows from what I've already said. Evangelism is a top priority. Foreign missions, taking the gospel to other tribes, peoples, languages, other countries in the world. The church can't be the church, unless we're fulfilling the commission to go to all the nations and disciple them, teaching them all that the Lord has commanded. There's a priority in evangelism, within the local congregation, reaching the communities and neighborhoods, within the family, as well as abroad in the world at large. This introduction to the Doctrine of Salvation reinforces that priority.

Well, by way of conclusion, in this introductory lecture, we've established from the Scriptures, the importance of the Doctrine of Salvation within Biblical Christianity, as well as for the believer's thinking, practice, and experience. In the remainder of the lectures throughout this fifth module on Systematic Theology, we'll be delving into a more detailed consideration of what God has revealed about each of the components of the application of salvation. And as we do so, we'll be led with David to sing, in the words of Psalm 106, verse 4, "Remember me, O LORD, with the favour that thou bearest unto thy people: O visit me with thy salvation."

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

## *Module 5 ~ Lecture 2*

### **The Doctrine of Union with Christ**

Ezekiel 16 provides us with a very graphic picture. It describes God's people as an infant abandoned in an open field, lying in its blood. In this deplorable condition, God came. He rescued, he healed, he raised, and nurtured, and ultimately beautified her. But even more, he, as the King of Glory, married her. So in Ezekiel 16, verse 8, we read, "Behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I swear unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord GOD, and thou becamest mine." This is a picture of a destitute orphan, who ends up marrying a wealthy prince. The true believer is not like a beggar, who finds himself separated from Christ, and calling out from a distance for some benefit. No, he's like a hopeless person, who has been married to a prince with limitless resources. In being united to Christ, all that belongs to Christ becomes the Christian's. Our debts are cancelled, and Christ provides every benefit and blessing that we will ever need. The crucial point is union with Christ. We'll return to Ezekiel 16 at the end of this lecture.

But in this series of lectures in this fifth module, or course, on Systematic Theology, we are devoting ourselves to the study of the doctrine of Salvation. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about how the Spirit applies the redemption of Christ to the individual soul of the believer. In the previous lecture, we considered an introduction to this module. In this lecture, we will consider the doctrine of union with Christ. This doctrine places Christ at the center of salvation. Everything needful is to be found in him alone. All the benefits and blessings of God's plan of redemption are wrapped up in Christ, and received through union with him.

We will begin by considering, first of all, a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of union with Christ. We read in Ephesians 1, verse 3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ." Ephesians 1, verse 3 is the beginning of a marvelous passage that extends from verse 3 to verse 14, in which Paul covers the full sweep of the benefits of redemption. Notice in verse 3 that he speaks of "all spiritual blessings" that believers receive and enjoy. He has in mind absolutely everything that pertains to salvation. But secondly, it is especially important to note that he says all the benefits are found "in Christ"—found in Christ. Now Scripture often uses the prepositions "in" and "with" to describe the spiritual reality of union with Christ. The believer partakes of Christ's benefits through being united to him. Paul then goes on to trace the implications, noting that everything from election, to redemption by Christ's blood, to the gift of the Spirit, to heavenly inheritance is found in the Lord Jesus Christ. So the believer's union with Christ extends from eternity past to eternity future. All of this is spelled out in verses 3 to 14.

Furthermore, the rest of the Bible reinforces this connection between union with Christ and the various aspects of the application of redemption. I'll give you some examples. We are called in

Christ—1 Corinthians 1:9. We’re made alive, or regenerated in Christ—Ephesians 2, verses 4 and 5. In Christ, we’re justified—well, this is seen in lots of places: Romans 8:1; 1 Corinthians 1, verse 30; 2 Corinthians 5, verse 21; Philippians 3:8 and 9. We’re adopted in Christ—as we see in Galatians 3:26. We’re sanctified in Christ—again, I could give you a long string of texts with regards to this: 1 Corinthians 1, verse 2; 1 Corinthians 1, verse 30; John 15, verses 4 and 5; Ephesians 4:6; and so on. We’re also created anew in Christ—as we see in 2 Corinthians 5, verse 17. The believer perseveres in the life of faith, in union with Christ—John 10, verses 27 and 28; Romans 8, verses 38 and 39. Even at death, the bodies of believers remain in union with Christ—1 Thessalonians 4, verse 14. We’ll be raised with Christ—1 Corinthians 15, verse 22. And we’ll be eternally glorified with Christ—1 Thessalonians 4:16 and 17; and many other passages. So what do we see? We see the point made in Ephesians 1, verse 3, that all spiritual blessings are found in Christ, the way in which Paul unpacks that all the way through verse 14, that’s reinforced everywhere we turn in the Bible. All of these aspects of salvation—our regeneration, our justification, our sanctification, and so on—all of them are derived from union with Christ.

So in answering the question, “How is redemption applied to the sinner?” The first answer must be, “By uniting the sinner to Christ.” Go back to Ephesians 1, verse 7, which says, “In whom”—“In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.” Everything else we will learn in this course, on the doctrine of Salvation, flows from this point of union with Christ. *Westminster Larger Catechism*, question #69, says, “The communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ, is their partaking of the virtue of his mediation, in their justification, adoption, sanctification, and whatever else, in this life, manifests their union with him.”

Well, this introduces to us the doctrine of union with Christ. In the remainder of this lecture, we’ll explore what the Scriptures teach us about the role of union with Christ within the doctrines of salvation. And that brings us, secondly, to considering a doctrinal exposition of this introductory material. In *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, question #30, we have the question, “How does the Spirit apply to us the redemption purchased by Christ?” And the answer is this: “The Spirit applieth to us the redemption purchased by Christ, by working faith in us, and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling.” Well, in the last lecture, we learned about the importance of both redemption accomplished and redemption applied. And the Shorter Catechism explains that the Spirit applies the redemption that’s accomplished by Christ, by uniting the believer to Christ. We learned that union with Christ is the fountainhead for everything else that flows in the application of redemption, as we noted earlier, the believer’s regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification, and so on.

Well, how important is this doctrine to understanding salvation? John Calvin spoke of union with Christ as having “the highest degree of importance”—and he goes on—“for this is the design of the gospel, that Christ may become ours, and that we may be engrafted into his body.” He wrote elsewhere, “For we await salvation from him, not because he appears to us far off, but because he makes us engrafted into his body, participants not only in all of his benefits, but also in himself.” The Puritan, Thomas Goodwin, expressed a similar conviction, when he said that “Being in Christ and united to him is the fundamental constitution of a Christian.”

Thirdly, union with Christ lies at the heart of the gospel, something basic and central to all of salvation. It describes how believers become recipients of all that Christ has done and accomplished in redemption. The believer is made one with him. So, notice, for example, how often Paul uses the word “in” as in, “in Christ.” Once you come to see the doctrine of union with Christ, you’ll

discover that it is pervasive throughout the whole New Testament—hundreds of references. Everything that Christ accomplished in his life and ministry, he did as a representative of his people. The believer enjoys the benefits through union with him.

Now, to understand this more fully, the New Testament employs two phrases to describe this union. So the first is, the believer is in Christ. And here you have dozens of examples of passages of Scripture. The second is that Christ is in the believer. And again, you have many passages of Scripture that state this. And in some places, we find both of these expressions together—several places. In 1 John 4, verse 13, for example, it says, “Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit.” So Christ is not only for us, and among us, and before us, but he’s described as in us, and the Christian is found in Christ. The Bible says that Christ is formed in believers—Galatians 4:19. He dwells in our hearts—Ephesians 3:17. That the believer puts on the Lord Jesus Christ—Romans 13:14. That the church is the body of Christ—1 Corinthians 6, verse 15; chapter 12, verse 27. That the church is one flesh with Christ—Ephesians 5:31 and 32. The believers gain Christ and are found in him—Philippians 3:8 and 9.

Well, fourthly, we must understand the nature of this real union, which is both a representative or federal union, as well as a personal or mystical union. And again, the Bible provides us with a series of pictures to illustrate this truth. First of all, it says that Christ is united to the church, as the head of the body. So that’s a picture of union. Believers are members of the body, joined to the body, of which Christ is the head. Secondly, Christ is married to his people. You see this in Ephesians 5, verses 30 to 32: “For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. . . This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.” We read in the Song of Solomon, “I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine.” So the first picture is members joined to the head; the second picture is marriage—a husband joined to a wife. Thirdly, believers are described as living stones that are joined to Christ and built upon him as the foundation, forming a house which becomes the habitation of God. The fourth picture is that believers are branches that are grafted into Christ as the vine—the Gospel of John, chapter 15, verse 4: “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.” The fifth picture is that Christ uses the image of food being consumed by the eater. By faith we are united to Christ and feed upon him. John 6, verse 56: “He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him.” It’s a picture again of union—of oneness. So all of these are pictures that the Bible gives of union with Christ that help us.

But the Bible also describes this union in a variety of ways. What is it? What is it like? What’s its nature? And there are several things here. First of all, it is spiritual—it’s a spiritual union, not a physical union—1 Corinthians 6, verse 17. Secondly, it is a mysterious and glorious union beyond our full ability to comprehend. We see this in Ephesians 5, verse 32. But notice Colossians 1, verse 27 says, “To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” So it’s a mysterious and glorious union. Thirdly, it’s an intimate union. Christ is in the believer, and the believer in him. And then fourthly, it is an indissoluble union. Once the believer is in Christ, the believer is forever joined to him; can never be disconnected, severed, or taken out of union with him.

Furthermore, we need to go on and connect this doctrine of union with Christ to Christ’s ministry. Because the Bible teaches that all of Christ’s work, you know, what he’s accomplished, was on behalf of the believer. So they are united to him at all points of his activity. Notice how Scripture draws these connections in our union with Christ. In Christ’s crucifixion, the believer is crucified with him—Galatians 2:20. In his death, we are baptized into his death—Romans 6, verse 6. In his

burial, we're buried with him—Colossians 2, verse 12. In his resurrection, we are resurrected with Christ—Romans 6, verse 5. In his ascension, we have been raised with him—Colossians 3, verse 1 and following. And in his heavenly session, we sit with him in heavenly places, so that our life is hid with Christ in God—Ephesians 2, verse 6. Even in his promised return, when Christ, who is our life, appears, we also will appear with him in glory—you see this in Romans 6, in Colossians 2, and Colossians 3. Well, this is only a partial list. We could go on. But you see the importance. All that Christ is accomplishing in his work, the believer is united with him in that activity.

Yet the question still remains: How? How are believers united to Christ? In other words, what is the bond that brings them together? So if you think, you know, physical union comes through contact—a physical branch being grafted into a stock of a tree; or a man and woman coming together in marriage. In a lot of those pictures, physical union comes through contact. But you say to yourself, “Yes, but Christ is in heaven, and we are on earth, so how can this union take place?” Well, the answer is twofold. As the English Puritan, John Flavel, said, “The Spirit on Christ’s part, and faith his work on our part, are the two ligaments by which we are knit to Christ.” And so, first of all, the first and primary bond of union, from Christ’s side, is through the Holy Spirit. Christ takes the sinner into union with himself through the agency of the Holy Spirit, whereby he joins himself to the believing soul. The Spirit indwells the believer. The same infinite Spirit that dwells with Christ dwells in his people. So that Christ dwells in us by his Spirit. First John 4, verse 13, says, “Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit.” So that’s the first half. Secondly, on man’s side, we are united to Christ by faith, which is a gift of God granted by the Spirit. So Ephesians 3, verse 17, says, “That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith.” It is by faith that the believer receives Christ. So the believer is united to Christ in time, by faith. We appropriate and continue to live out of this union through faith—Galatians 2, verse 20; Ephesians 3, verses 16 and 17. So the believer is united to Christ by the Holy Spirit, through faith in Christ. That’s how the union comes about. Well, that’s a doctrinal exposition.

Thirdly, we need to go on to explore this doctrine polemically, and just a couple of brief things here. First of all, overlooking or neglecting the doctrine of union with Christ would destroy the link between the redemption Christ accomplished, and the application of that salvation to the believing soul. So, it’s important to recognize we’re covering this doctrine of union with Christ at the beginning of this series of lectures on the doctrine of Salvation. We’re going to go on to look at all the various components of what that entails. But we’re starting with the union—union with Christ. If we neglect this, you wouldn’t be able to understand how all that Christ has done ends up becoming appropriated by the individual soul. It would also remove Christ from the center of salvation. He has the preeminence. Everything must be found in him, and everything must flow from him. So beware of neglecting it, or overlooking union with Christ.

Secondly, it’s important to note that we cannot separate Christ from his benefits, or from the benefits that flow from him to the soul. No one can have forgiveness and heaven without having the whole Christ. Calvin speaks of Christ coming to the believer clothed in his benefits, so that in receiving Christ, we receive the benefits with him. So we can’t divide Christ. There are those who have this idea that you can have Jesus as your Savior without having him as Lord. That would be to rip Christ in two, and take only one part. So we either have the whole Christ, or none of him. He has to be Savior and Lord. And when it comes to the doctrine of Salvation, you’ll see how this is connected in our future lectures, because both justification and sanctification, both of them flow as benefits from union with Christ. You can’t have one without the other. You can’t have justification and not have sanctification. The true believer will grow in holiness, as a result of God’s activity



secured in the history of redemption. Romans 8, verse 29: “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.” So let us beware of the error of disconnecting Christ from his benefits.

Fourthly, we can now draw some practical application for ourselves. First of all, the church is the body and bride of Christ. So union with Christ provides the basis for unity, or union, within the church. Each individual believer is a member joined to the head, which is Christ, but thereby joined to one another, so that we’re brought together. We’re united to fellow believers, as a result of being united to Christ. You’ll notice the importance of the connections that believers have to each other in places like Romans chapter 12, and, 1 Corinthians chapter 12, and Ephesians 4, and all of those passages throughout the New Testament that speak about the people of God, in terms of being together, of one another, of being mindful of one another, and relating to one another. We need other Christians. It’s impossible to go solo to heaven. We have to depend upon other believers that we are united to. Ephesians 4:16 says, “From whom”—that is, Christ—“the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.” And so, believers can only grow in grace by growing together. So that’s one application, that our union with Christ results in practical implications in terms of our union with fellow believers.

Secondly, union with Christ provides the basis for communion with Christ, or union provides the basis for fellowship with Christ. That communion or fellowship with Christ flows from union. First John 3, verse 24, it says, “And he that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us.” So communion with God is part of the core of the Christian life. Communion or fellowship means giving and receiving, and so we are receiving things from Christ—his grace, his blessings, his benefits—and we are giving things, in terms of the exercise of faith, and worship, and in praise, and in service, in obedience, and love to him. And there’s this giving and taking, so that the believer has communion with Christ in prayer, has communion with Christ in the ministry of the word, has communion with Christ in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, and so on. Their whole life is taken up in walking with Christ, and holding fellowship with him throughout the day and week, and so on. Well, all of that, which is so important, and the core, as I say, that communion flows from union with him. You can’t have the one without the other.

Thirdly, to apply this more specifically, the two sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper portray the reality of this blessed union and communion. First Corinthians 12, verse 13 says, “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.” So, you think of Baptism. Baptism signifies union with Christ. Jesus said, in Matthew 28, verse 19, “Baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” Baptized into the name—it’s a picture of union. Paul develops this, the connection of Baptism and union with Christ in Romans 6. It represents the believer’s being engrafted into Christ, incorporation into the death, burial, and resurrection of the living Christ.

Well then, secondly under this point, the Lord’s Supper signifies the communion between Christ and believers that derives from the privileges of union with him. The Supper is chiefly about spiritual nourishment, about feeding upon Christ by faith. First Corinthians 10, verse 16: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?” Christ gives himself to the believer for sustaining the believer, through this feast. Those in union with Christ continue to receive Christ

through his spiritual presence in this ordained means of grace, the ordinance of the Lord's Supper.

Fourthly, in terms of considering this practically, I want us to turn to that passage I opened with at the beginning of this lecture, in Ezekiel 16. We noted, you'll remember, the infant that was found in an open field, destitute, covered in its own blood, how God took them and cleansed them, and raised them, and fed them, and nurtured them, and then ultimately, married them. Well, the main point of that passage is something further, because the Lord is saying, "After all of this bounty, after all this blessing, after all these things that I've done to you, in taking you, who were undeserving, into union with myself, and marrying you to myself," he goes on to warn them and even rebuke them about the danger of spiritual harlotry. So this is an important point, in terms of application of union with Christ. Paul brings this out in places like 1 Corinthians 6 as well. He says, "Don't you know that those who are joined to a harlot become one with her?" And he's speaking about how incompatible it is for the Christian to go after sin and the things of sin when they're wed to Christ. And so there's this graphic imagery of the threat, when the believer allows other things in their life to replace Christ—idols, things that they love, things that they pursue, the world, and various sins, and so on. They're engaging in whoredom, in spiritual harlotry. They're forsaking their first love and turning after other lovers. And this is absolutely incompatible with union with Christ. When the believer comes to understand the doctrine of union with Christ and being married to him, there's a pledge, there's a covenant, there's a loyalty, there's a devotion. There's an obligation to the Lord Jesus Christ. And when we drift away from him, and begin to pursue other loves, the things of this world, more than him, we're engaging in harlotry. And seeing that should horrify us. Seeing that should reinforce our sense of attachment to him, and our sense of staying close to him, and walking in holiness and in devotion to him.

Well, in conclusion, in this lecture, we've learned from the Scriptures the important place of union with Christ within the doctrines of Salvation. Everything else that we'll consider in this fifth module about the application of redemption flows from union with Christ. In the next lecture, we'll consider the doctrines of Effectual Calling and Regeneration, which form the beginning of the application of redemption to the believing soul.

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

## *Module 5 ~ Lecture 3*

### **The Doctrines of Effectual Calling and Regeneration**

In John, chapter 11, we're given the remarkable account of a man named Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. He had fallen sick, and his family called for Jesus to come. But in the intervening time, Lazarus died and was buried in a tomb, to the great sorrow and heartache of his family and friends. When Christ arrived, Lazarus had already been dead for four days, and his body had begun to decompose. But Jesus told Martha that she would see the glory of God. He stood at the open door of the tomb, and in verses 43 and 44, we read that Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth." The crowds were astonished, and news of Jesus' miracle spread far and wide. This physical miracle illustrates the spiritual realities of God coming to save a soul. And it's appropriate to draw this parallel, as the Bible does so, in Ephesians 2, verse 1, we read, "And you hath he quickened"—or made alive—"who were dead in trespasses and sins." It's a description of salvation coming to a soul. Lazarus did nothing. He did not call upon the Lord—he was dead. Likewise the sinful soul has no ability to seek the Lord on its own, as we see in Romans 3, none seek after the Lord: "None are righteous, no, not one." When Jesus spoke and called Lazarus forth, Lazarus did not sit, and think, and contemplate Christ's words—he had no such option. He was drawn forth at the Lord's word. So too, when the Holy Spirit effectually calls and regenerates a sinful soul, it is brought to spiritual life by the power of God. The Lord initiates, and the Lord makes efficacious his work of grace, with no contribution or credit to the natural man. He takes the spiritually dead and gives them life.

The series of lectures in this fifth module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the doctrine of Salvation. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about how the Spirit applies the redemption of Christ to the individual soul of the believer. In the previous lecture, we considered the doctrine of Union with Christ, the fountainhead from which all the benefits of redemption flow. In the remainder of this module, we will explore individual components of the application of salvation. In this present lecture, we will consider the doctrines of Effectual Calling and Regeneration. These are two closely-related, though distinguished, doctrines within the Scripture. They address God's initial work of applying saving grace in the individual life of a soul. Calling comes first, followed in close connection by Regeneration.

And so, as is our pattern in these lectures, we'll begin by considering a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of Regeneration. We read, in Ezekiel 36, verses 25 to 28, these words: "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new

spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God.”

Notice, first of all, that the sovereign Lord takes the initiative in this work. Beginning in verse 25, it says, “Then will *I* sprinkle water upon you . . . *I* will cleanse you. . . *I* will give you . . . *I* will put my spirit within you.” This is God’s work and God’s action. He comes to the soul to bring about these saving mercies, and it’s not the individual who comes to him. Secondly, regeneration is characterized by cleansing from the guilt and pollution of sin. The language is, “from all your filthiness, and from all your idols.” This constitutes a radical purification of the soul. Thirdly, it includes a transformation of the heart. He says, “A new heart also will I give . . . I will take away the stony heart . . . I will give you an heart of flesh.” This describes a type of heart surgery. God removes a dead, lifeless heart, and supplies a spiritually living heart. This severs the connection with the old man, creating a completely new man after the image of Christ. Fourthly, notice that regeneration negates the past, while re-forming the future. It must cleanse from sin, as well as re-create in righteousness. That which was dead is made alive in Christ. Fifthly, at regeneration, the Spirit indwells the believer, and implants a new principle of grace within him, enabling him to walk in newness of life and obedience to God. Ezekiel says, “I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.” This reflects a further transformation of the soul. Sixthly, and lastly, you should note, in verse 28, that all of this is grounded in the covenant of grace. Notice the language: “Ye shall be my people, and I will be your God.” That’s the core of the covenant of grace. Well, this introduces us to the doctrine of Regeneration.

In the remainder of this lecture, we will explore what the Scriptures teach us about both Effectual Calling and Regeneration, within the doctrines of Salvation. And so, secondly, we’ll consider a doctrinal exposition of this material, beginning with the doctrine of Effectual Calling, followed by Regeneration. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 10, paragraph 1, defines Effectual Calling. It says, “All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by his word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds, spiritually and savingly, to understand the things of God; taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them an heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and by his almighty power determining them to that which is good; and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ; yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace.” Well, the *Westminster Confession* here appropriately subsumes Regeneration under the broader concept of Effectual Calling. You’ll have seen in the language there, taking away their heart of stone, and giving them a heart of flesh, renewing their wills, and so on, that kind of language which refers to regeneration. This is, of course, very appropriate. You’ll notice the word, “calling” in Romans 8:30 probably includes this. But most Reformed theologians have found it helpful to make a distinction between these two facets of the Spirit’s work, Effectual Calling and Regeneration. So for the sake of clarity at the beginning of this lecture, we can distinguish effectual calling and regeneration by comparing the Biblical emphasis with these two things.

So, just briefly, effectual calling is an act of summoning the sinner, whereas regeneration is an act of God begetting again the sinner. Secondly, effectual calling occurs on a conscious level—we’re aware of it, whereas regeneration occurs in the subconscious—we’re not aware of it

initially. Thirdly, effectual calling comes from without, whereas regeneration is a work of God within. Fourthly, effectual calling is an activity of moral suasion, whereas regeneration is a creative activity of God.

So, turning, first of all, to Effectual Calling, we must first recognize that the terms “call” and “calling” are used in two different ways in the Bible. This has been frequently distinguished by the terms “external call,” and “internal call.” The external call is the simple presentation of the gospel that you see in preaching, and so on. The internal, or effectual call is the work of God efficaciously and savingly applying the gospel to the soul of an individual. So, at some point in time, the external call—the preaching of the word—and internal call take place simultaneously in the elect. Whereas, by way of contrast, the external call takes place without the internal call in the unbeliever—in the reprobate. So the external call is made effectual, powerful, by the Holy Spirit, in the heart of the elect. The word “calling” in Scripture refers to the internal or effectual call the vast majority of the time, like in that passage in Romans 8, verse 30.

As we already noted, with regards to the external call—the outward call, this is the presentation and explication of the doctrines of the gospel. So it includes the overtures of the promises of the gospel to those who sit under the preaching of the word. The promises are what provides a warrant for the sinner to believe and repent. And we’ve talked about this in previous lectures, but we’re speaking specifically about “warrant” here. The sinner is sitting and listening to the preaching of the gospel. What gives the warrant to receive, to lay hold of those promises, and to apply them to their own soul, to believe them, and to respond with repentance? Well, the warrant is not a knowledge of the secret counsel of God whether they’re elect or not. The warrant is not something that is found inside their own soul that they have to recognize or untangle. The warrant to believe is in the promises themselves which comes in this external call. The external call is addressed universally to all those who hear the gospel. You see it in the opening words of Isaiah 55. You see it in Jesus’ words at the end of Matthew 11, “Come unto me, all ye who labour and are heavy laden,” and so on. Well, this external call is obviously broader than election. We know that, because we read, in Matthew 22, verse 14, “For many are called, but few are chosen.” So, when it says, “many are called,” it’s talking about the external call in the preaching there.

But then next, we need to think about Effectual Calling, which is our primary focus, with this internal call. And there are various stages of effectual calling. This is highlighted in *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, question 31—different facets of effectual calling. They include things like the fact that the Spirit convinces of sin and misery, John 16, verse 8. The Spirit comes and convinces the soul of sin and misery. The Spirit enlightens the mind, enabling it to see—1 Corinthians 2, verses 14 and 15; John 16, verse 4. And the Spirit comes and renews the will. This is another component of effectual calling—1 Thessalonians 1, verses 4 and 5, or what we saw earlier, in Ezekiel 36, or places like Acts 16, verse 14. So it is the Spirit’s work to create the response in the soul. Another component of effectual calling is the Spirit persuading and enabling the sinner to embrace Christ, who is freely offered in the gospel—John 6, verse 37, verse 44, verse 65, and so on. So God is the author of effectual calling—1 Corinthians 1, verse 9, or 2 Timothy 1, verses 8 and 9.

God is the author of the effectual call, which is the first step in the application of salvation to the individual. The Father, the first person of the Trinity, is the one who planned salvation. We saw that in a previous series of lectures. And the Father is the One who calls his elect. Again, Romans 8:30; 1 Corinthians 1, verse 9; 1 John 3, verse 1; and others. So that’s the role of the Father. It is the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who is the efficacious applier of effectual calling. We see this in John 3, verse 5; and chapter 6, verse 63. So the Father initiates, and the Spirit enlightens



the soul.

Well, we should think further about some of the characteristics of effectual calling. We see that it is a divine summons, which actually unites the believer to Christ. It's based on the sovereign, eternal decree of God, and it is through the irresistible and persuasive power of the Spirit that it comes about. So it takes place, along with the external call, within the conscious recognition of men. Man's mind is engaged in the conviction of sin, and the persuasion to embrace Christ. All of this helps us understand the doctrine of Effectual Calling.

Well, we can turn now to the related doctrine of Regeneration. And there are really three different words that the New Testament uses for regeneration. I won't give you the Greek words, but they're translated, the first one's translated "rebirth," or "regeneration." Places like Matthew 19, verse 28; or Titus 3, verse 5. The second word is "to beget again." So, 1 Peter 1, verse 3 and verse 23. And the third word is "to be born from above." Jesus uses this in John 3, verse 3 and verse 7. So regeneration is an act of God, by which he implants the gracious principle of new life in man, sends his Spirit to indwell the soul, and makes the governing disposition of the soul holy. So it is the creative act of God in begetting again. It is often referred to as the new birth, or the act of being born again. That which was dead is made alive in Christ. So regeneration defined in this restrictive sense is, what, well it's instantaneous—regeneration is instantaneous. It's not a lengthy process. That can be distinguished from God's work of conversion, which we'll consider in the future lectures. It is also monergistic. That word means that it is working in one direction. God alone is the One who is at work in regeneration, not man. Well, we can also say that regeneration takes place in the subconscious. So it's something that's taking place secretly in the soul. Man is not aware, if you will, of God's work of regeneration initially. That becomes conscious, with the gift of faith, and the exercise of faith and repentance, and so on. But regeneration, in this restrictive sense, is in the subconscious. And lastly, we can say that man is passive. Man is not contributing, he's not active in any way in God's monergistic work of regeneration. And this helps us, because then it eliminates or it clarifies for us the relationship of regeneration to the order of salvation—the order of the application of salvation, which we discussed in the first lecture. Because, why? Regeneration follows calling—it follows effectual calling. It is both distinguished from calling, and sometimes identified with it, as we noted above. But this requires defining calling and regeneration, both in their restrictive and broader senses. So calling unites us to Christ and the inwardly operative grace of God; whereas regeneration is the beginning of that inwardly operative saving grace, so it follows calling.

But then secondly, it precedes conversion. Conversion refers to faith and repentance. So regeneration comes before faith and repentance. Regeneration is the commencement of all saving grace in us. Conversion—faith and repentance—signifies the first exercise of the gracious disposition that is implanted in regeneration. So being born of God—which is regeneration—produces fruit—the fruit of faith and repentance, and so on. And much of 1 John spells this out for us. God's call requires a reciprocal response of faith, and that faith itself is a gift of God.

So given man's depraved condition, and inability to do any spiritual good, how is it possible for people in such a condition to be brought to faith? How can these things be brought together? Well, it is God's grace, and his re-creative power in regeneration that resolves this tension. He quickens the dead through the new birth. He makes the dead alive. And that regeneration manifests his work of irresistible grace by the Holy Spirit. And having been brought alive, the soul is able to be given the gift of faith, and to exercise that faith. So regeneration is a pivotal change that includes the implanting of a principle of new life in man, a new governing disposition of the soul. The renova-

tion affects the whole man in his mind, in his will, and in his emotions. It is also an instantaneous change, unlike, for example, the continual process of sanctification.

Well, this brings us to emphasizing the glory of God in regeneration, because God the Holy Spirit is the agent who applies the work of redemption, including regeneration to the elect. While the Spirit is the divine initiator and re-creator, the mode of regeneration is mysterious. And John 3, verse 8 brings this out. It's the Spirit who causes the blind to see, the spiritually dead to rise, and the spiritually ignorant to understand. The glory of God is displayed in this grace, mercy, and love. We see that all of the glory, and honor, and praise goes to him alone. We noted earlier that the Reformed doctrine of Regeneration teaches that it is monergistic, not synergistic. So it is God working God working on man. Synergistic would mean "to work together," that God is working, and man is working. That is not true in regeneration. The elect are passive, not active. They're receiving something from the Lord when they're being born again. So in contrast to conversion, regeneration takes place in the subconscious, not in the consciousness of the person. All of this comes together really in Jesus' words to Nicodemus, in John 3, verses 3 to 8. Jesus tells Nicodemus that being born again, or regeneration, is the essential prerequisite for entering the kingdom of God. The word "again," in verse 3, can also be translated "from above," highlighting the monergistic aspect of regeneration that we find elsewhere in Scripture. The Spirit of God is the source of the new birth, as Jesus says, "born of the Spirit." And you'll see this elsewhere, in 1 John, and so on. So this teaches us—all of this teaches us about the nature of the work of regeneration, the work of God's Spirit in bringing the dead to life, and causing his Spirit to indwell them.

Well, thirdly, we can consider this doctrine polemically, and we'll consider two things briefly. First of all, the error of baptismal regeneration. And there are various forms in which this erroneous doctrine is represented. The Roman Catholics believe that baptism washes away original sin. Anglicans have a different form. The Lutherans have a different form of this same error. It teaches that the grace of regeneration is effectually conveyed by the rite of baptism, which is viewed as the instrumental cause. Reformed theologians reject this. They reject the infusion of grace by baptism, which disengages the indispensable work of the Spirit in granting the gift of faith. A related and more subtle doctrine is that of presumed regeneration for those who are baptized. So there are some who would say, "Well, we don't believe in baptismal regeneration as the Roman Catholics do, but instead, we view children and others who have been baptized, we presume that they are regenerate, that the Spirit has regenerated them." And this is a problem. It comes from a faulty doctrine of the covenant. They believe that because, for example, a child has received the sign and seal of the covenant, that therefore, we should view them as having received all of the substance and reality of the covenant. And so they'll say things like, "Well, you don't tell a baptized person that they need to be born again, because we're presuming that they're already born again, because they're baptized. Well this whole idea is exploded in the Bible; it's absolutely erroneous, and it comes out clearly in John, chapter 3. Because here you have Nicodemus coming to Jesus. Nicodemus is a son of the covenant, if there ever has been one: circumcised on the eighth day, raised in the religion of the Old Testament Jews, he himself had become a teacher, a minister within that religion, and so on. Jesus comes to him, not presuming at all that he's regenerated. Jesus comes to the son of the covenant, and says, "Ye must be born again." He tells him that he has to be born from above—born of the Spirit. And so we must reject the doctrine of presumed regeneration for those who are baptized. Well that deals with baptismal regeneration and some of its forms.

Secondly, there's the question of elect infants. So the *Westminster Confession*, chapter 10, paragraph 3 says, "Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through

the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth. So also are all other elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the word.” So this section refers to infants and those who are physically incapable of being outwardly called. Those who are mentally retarded, and so on. It’s not a reference, in other words, to the unevangelized throughout the world. Notice that the Confession does not state that all infants who die in infancy are elect. But it does say that regeneration is the prerequisite for being reconciled to God. Infants, of course, are incapable of expressing the fruits of faith and repentance, which require conscious comprehension, intellectual capabilities, and so on. But the Lord is able to come, and to, by the Spirit, irresistibly regenerate the soul of even an infant, and to bring them to new life. Some of the older Reformed theologians refer to “the seed of faith” being implanted by the Spirit within the elect, within elect infants, by which they are justified, which is an act of God independent of man. That faith won’t be expressed in an infant who doesn’t have the capabilities. The point is, God is savingly working in them.

Well, we’ll hasten on. Fourthly, considering this doctrine practically, we can draw some practical applications for ourselves. A few things—first of all, we need to see the importance of bringing souls under the preaching of the gospel. Earlier in the lecture, we talked about the external call. This is the appointed means that God has given and uses. In Romans 10, Paul asks that series of questions, where he ends up saying, How will they hear without a preacher, and how will they have a preacher unless one is sent, and so on. And he goes on to say that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of the Lord. This is the means—the preaching of the gospel that the Holy Spirit accompanies to call the elect to himself. And so it reinforces for us the priority of evangelism, both in our own local area, but also the priority of foreign missions. Christ’s great commission was to go and to preach the gospel to all nations, discipling the nations. And so this is a priority for us.

Secondly, we see the indispensable work of the Holy Spirit to make that preaching powerful or efficacious. So without the Spirit, it would all be in vain. Therefore, we need to pray for the ministry of the Spirit. We need to pray the Spirit would accompany the word preached, in the souls of those who hear it. Because, after all, we can do many things—ministers, and Christians, and even godly parents—you can do many things, you know, for other people—for your children, or otherwise. You know, in the case of children, you can discipline them, you can catechize them, you can have family worship, you can give them a Christian education, you can teach them the things of the Lord, and so on, but we cannot give another soul what they need most—that is, a new heart, and the Holy Spirit. Only the Holy Spirit can do this. And so you see the indispensable work of the Spirit and our need to pray for them.

Thirdly, the church must never cease to proclaim boldly to all, “Ye must be born again.” This must be a clarion blast that goes forth from the pulpits throughout the world, telling needy sinners, “Ye must be born again.” You need a new heart. You need God to cleanse you from the filthiness of sin. You need the Holy Spirit to indwell you. You need the principle of grace planted in your soul. “Ye must be born again.” Let us never, ever cease from proclaiming that important truth.

Fourthly, and lastly, we see the wonder of God’s sovereign grace, which leads us to worship. We see that all of the glory, from beginning to end, goes to the Lord alone, for his saving mercies in redeeming a sinful soul. And that ought to leave us with a breathtaking sense of the wonder of God’s sovereign grace. That ought to fuel the heart of the born-again, regenerate Christian. It ought to fuel them with praise and adoration for the Lord’s riches and mercy. And may the Lord deepen our worship in that way.

Well, in this lecture, we have considered an introduction to what the Bible teaches about

Effectual Calling and Regeneration. We've seen the sovereign work of God in initiating the application of salvation to the soul. This constitutes the beginning of a string of pearls that we will explore over this module. In the next lecture, we will consider, with the Lord's help, the doctrine of Saving Faith.

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

## *Module 5 ~ Lecture 4*

### **The Doctrine of Saving Faith**

Imagine coming into an empty room after a long day of very hard work. Your exhausted, your feet and back ache, and your legs are weary. You are eager to sit down and rest. In the room, you see a chair. You approach it, look around it, and study its structure and features. Someone comes into the room and tells you that it is very sturdy—one of the best, made by a top manufacturer. As you look at it closely, you can see that it is well built. You now have a knowledge that the chair can hold your weight, in fact, you affirm the testimonies about its qualities, and you're led to be fully convinced that the chair can provide a safe and comfortable place to sit and rest your body. Finally, you plop down and nestle into the chair.

Well, this provides a simple illustration of the nature of saving faith. Faith includes a knowledge of the gospel—you cannot believe in something you know nothing about. The truth of Christ crucified comes to us through the Scriptures. But faith is more than mere knowledge. We also must be led to affirm the truthfulness and reliability of Christ's ability to save sinners such as ourselves. But faith is still more. True saving faith leads the sinner to putting the full weight of their soul in Christ's person and work. They must actually receive and rest in Christ, and Christ alone, depending entirely upon him to save their souls. They must personally apply the gospel to themselves, and actually put their whole trust in the Redeemer.

This series of lectures in this fifth module, or course, on Systematic Theology is devoted to the doctrine of Salvation. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about how the Spirit applies the redemption of Christ to the individual soul of the believer. In the previous lecture, we considered the doctrines of Effectual Calling and Regeneration, which form the beginning of the application of salvation to the elect. In the remainder of this module, we are exploring the other individual components of what the application of salvation includes. So in this present lecture, we will consider the doctrine of Saving Faith. This is an important and indispensable truth regarding the way in which an individual believer comes into the full orbit of free grace and the saving mercies of the Lord Jesus Christ. Effectual Calling and Regeneration come first, followed by Saving Faith. And so we'll begin, as is usual in our series of lectures, by considering this doctrine from a passage of Scripture, to open up our consideration of the doctrine of Saving Faith.

We read, in Ephesians 2, verses 8 to 10, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." In Ephesians 2, Paul is describing how the believers in Ephesus came to salvation in Christ. He begins, in verse 1, with Regeneration, which we considered in the last lecture. He says, "And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins." God brought the dead



to life. In verses 1, 2, and 3, he describes their former life that was characterized by deadness (as you saw in verse 1), by disobedience (in verse 2), and the fact that they were under the sentence of damnation—they were children of wrath (as you read in verse 3). But then you come—after all of that very heavy, very dark, bad news—you come in verse 4 to this words, “But God.” “But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us,” and then Paul goes on to describe the riches of God’s grace in salvation. He shows those riches of grace in the words of the passage that we’re considering, by saying, “For by grace are ye saved.” So grace is God giving unmerited favor to a sinner. It’s not that we bring things to God, but rather, in the gospel, it is what God brings to us. And that is received by us, as the passage says, “through faith.” So faith is the instrument by which sinners lay hold of Christ, and receive the benefits of his saving work. And this faith is indispensable to salvation. You may remember the words from Hebrews 11, verse 6: “But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” You’ll also notice that faith is “not of yourselves,” he says, “it is the gift of God.” Why is that? Because dead men can’t see, or hear, or respond. The natural man cannot believe or exercise faith on his own. So just as God regenerates, so he also supplies faith—it is a gift. Therefore, faith too is by God’s grace. You’ll also notice that faith is contrasted to human works, or merit, or deeds. You have these two things are set in antithesis to one another. Why? Because faith is doing what we described earlier. Faith is receiving what is provided in the Lord Jesus Christ, and it’s not bringing anything to the table—it’s receiving what the Lord gives. Whereas works is in the opposite direction. Works are the way in which a person tries to earn favor with the Lord—to contribute something in order to get something from God.

Well, because faith only receives and does not contribute, there is no room for any credit or boasting from man. All of the glory goes to God. You also see that, though faith unites the sinner to Christ, thus receiving all in him and through him, without our works, nevertheless, true saving faith is not fruitless. God re-creates the believer, so that good works flow from faith, by God’s grace. Again, God is the source of this fruitfulness. The believer is God’s workmanship. So while we’re justified by faith alone, it is never a faith that stands alone—it bears fruit, to God’s glory. Well, this introduces us to the doctrine of Saving Faith. In the remainder of this lecture, we’ll explore what the Scriptures teach us about the place of faith within the doctrines of Salvation.

Secondly, we’ll consider a doctrinal exposition of saving faith. We’ll be referring to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* at various points in this lecture, but we begin with a definition of the nature of faith. In *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 11, paragraph 1, it speaks of the believer “receiving and resting” on Christ “and his righteousness by faith, which faith they have not of themselves; it is the gift of God.” And then, in chapter 14, paragraph 2, it says, “But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.”

Well, where does faith, therefore, fit within the broader theological context? Well, first, we need to place it within the order of salvation. As we saw in the last lecture, faith comes after regeneration. This is the primary difference between the error of Arminianism, and the Biblical doctrines of Calvinism. Unregenerate man is dead, blind, ignorant, and unable to seek after God, or do any good, as Romans 3, verse 10 and following, teaches. That includes the inability to exercise saving faith. God must first give us a new heart, and make us capable of believing, and then he gives us the gift of faith.

We also see that faith comes before, or precedes justification. We’ll be considering that in a later lecture. But faith is the instrument, or means, by which the believer appropriates, or receives,

justification. Paul emphasizes this in his epistles, emphasizing that the believer is justified by faith alone. Faith also precedes and continues to be exercised through the work of the Spirit in sanctification. And then lastly, in heaven, of course, faith gives way to sight. Now, the believer sees by faith. “We walk by faith, not by sight.” But in glory, he will see clearly, with resurrected eyes, no longer by faith, as in a glass darkly, as 1 Corinthians 13 says.

But we should also consider faith more specifically in relationship to repentance. We’ll be considering repentance in the next lecture. But these two have to be held together—faith and repentance. They comprise, together, what we call conversion. Conversion is a transformation within the life of the believer. It is, negatively, turning from sin, and forsaking our old sinful self; and it is, positively, turning to embrace the Lord Jesus Christ, and new life. But how do faith and repentance relate to each other? Well, in one sense, they’re two sides of one coin. They’re inseparably connected. We believe penitently, and we repent believingly. But they must also be distinguished. For example, the believer is justified by faith alone—not justified by repentance. Though they appear, in our experience, together, they’re different concepts. We must believe that God is a loving Father, with a forgiving disposition, and ready to receive us, before we’ll turn from sin to him. Seeing his compassion and love leads us to find him attractive, and to find our sin repulsive. Unlike regeneration, conversion, or faith and repentance, takes place in the consciousness of man. He’s active and aware, rather than passive. The Bible demonstrates a diversity of experiences in conversion, between different people. It can be a dramatic crisis in the life of an individual, like with the Apostle Paul. Or, it can be a more quiet activity that may be more difficult to pinpoint to a precise time. But in both cases, the fruit will be evident in both.

Well, having considered the theological context, we can turn to considering the characteristics of saving faith more particularly. *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, question 86, supplies us with a definition. It says, “Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.” We see that the object of saving faith is the person and work of Jesus Christ. Faith is looking to the Lord Jesus Christ. We also see that the warrant of saving faith is the universal invitation of the unfailing promises of the gospel. We have warrant to lay hold of Christ because of the promises that come to us. We see that the source of saving faith is God. It does not originate in man, or in his native abilities, as we saw in Ephesians 2, verse 8: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that *not* of yourselves: it is the gift of God.” So faith is a gift of God’s grace, purchased by Christ for the elect. Christ secures all of our salvation, including faith. So we must be, in the words of Hebrews 12, verse 2: “Looking unto Jesus” who is “the author and finisher of our faith.”

Faith does remain, however, an act of man. God gives faith to us as a gift, and yet we do the believing. God does not believe for us. The exercise of faith is seeing our spiritual bankruptcy, and relying on Christ alone to save us. The Bible describes it as seeing, as tasting, as hearing, as clinging to Christ, and many other similar pictures. The effects of saving faith are justification, and peace with God, love, communion with God, union with Christ, and so on.

Well, to narrow the scope even further, Reformed theologians speak of the threefold aspect of saving faith—it consists of three components. The first is knowledge. There must first be comprehension of the actual content of the gospel, and the promises of God. You have to know something, in order to believe it. The second is assent. So one must acknowledge, comprehend, and approve the truthfulness, validity, and relevance of the facts of the gospel. And then thirdly, there is trust. Saving faith goes beyond just the intellectual exercise of knowledge and assent, to appropriating Christ in the gospel. This is the volitional—engaging our will—the volitional engagement of sav-

ing apprehension of the person of Christ. Because, after all, even the demons have an intellectual knowledge, without trust, as we see in James, chapter 2, verse 19. A sinner must fully receive Christ, as his all in all. *Westminster Larger Catechism*, question 72, brings this out, when it says, “Justifying faith is a saving grace . . .”—and it goes on—“whereby he . . . not only assenteth to the truth of the promise of the gospel, but receiveth and resteth upon Christ and his righteousness.” So not just knowledge and assent. It includes trust as well. You put these things together, and you can remember the opening introduction with regards to the chair—knowing something, affirming it, but then ultimately putting the weight of your body onto the chair. So with regards to knowledge, we learn that Christ died for sinners. And then there’s assent—we come to be able to say “It is true that Christ died for sinners like me. But then trust is saying, “I am a sinner that is receiving Christ and depending entirely on his saving atonement for my salvation. All three—knowledge, assent, and trust—comprise faith.

Next, we can think about the means of grace, and their relationship to faith. So in *Westminster Confession*, chapter 14, paragraph 1, it says, “The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts”—listen—“and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the word: by which also, and by the administration of the sacraments, and prayer, it is increased and strengthened.” So the Lord gives means—instruments through which he works faith in us. And that is, first and foremost, the word of God. The word of God comes to us. And so, in Romans 10, verse 17, it says, “So then faith *cometh* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” People are brought to saving faith through the ministry of the word. Paul describes Timothy’s experience, in 2 Timothy 3, verse 15; he says, “And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” His grandmother and his mother had taught him the Scriptures since his infancy, and that was the means that the Lord used to bring him to faith. This is true even for the believer after their conversion. We continue to grow in faith through the ministry of the word. Remember Jesus, in his prayer, in John 17, verse 17, prays, “Sanctify them by thy truth: thy word is truth.” So that growth in Christian maturity, which includes the growing in faith, comes through the truth of God’s word.

Now in addition to the word of God, the sacraments are also a means of enabling the believer to grow in faith. Think, for example, of the Lord’s Supper. We’re told there that we have communion with Christ in the Lord’s Supper, and that we feed upon Christ. How? How do we feed? What is that spiritual eating? It’s faith—we feed upon him by faith. It’s the exercise of faith in the soul that is receiving communion, and benefiting from Christ’s presence in the Supper. The sacraments will be covered in more detail in a future module.

Next, we should think about the degrees of faith. Turning back to *Westminster Confession*, chapter 14, paragraph 3, it says, “This faith is different in degrees, weak or strong; may be often and many ways assailed and weakened, but gets the victory; growing up in many to the attainment of a full assurance through Christ, who is both the author and finisher of our faith.” And this matches what we find in the Bible. The Bible will speak about weak faith, small faith, little faith. It also speaks about strong faith, and great faith. There are various degrees of faith, so that even God’s people, the true, true converted sinner has to pray in the words of what we read in the gospels, “I believe; help thou mine unbelief.” Or you think of the disciples turning to the Lord, and saying, Lord, “increase our faith.” So there are various degrees, and faith grows, it grows up into maturity. This will be relevant when we get into the practical section of this lecture.

Next, we also have to say something about what the Bible teaches regarding counterfeit faith—

false faith; fake faith. There are counterfeit types of faith. So, for example, the Bible speaks how there can be temporary or false conversions, which prove not to be true or genuine. You'll see this in the Book of Acts, with Simon the sorcerer, in Acts 8. We read about it in various other places. Let me highlight just a few forms of false, or counterfeit, faith. There's what we call historical faith. And this is a mere acceptance of the facts of Scripture, apart from any spiritual effect. So a person can know the Bible, and affirm that the Bible is God's word, without actually coming to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible speaks, secondly, about temporary faith, where there's a partial apprehension of the truth of God, which then dissipates into unbelief. You think, for example, of Jesus' parable of the seed that fell on stony ground. At first, it sprung up quickly, and there was joy. And at the beginning, it all looked good. But the problem was it wasn't rooted. There were no roots in the plant, so it withered and died in the heat of the sun. Now a person can have what looks like initially something of faith, but not actually have the root of the matter in them. And then there's also an empty, or dead, faith. So, a person can have a profession of attachment to Christ, which has external conformity in their lifestyle, and so on, but falls short of the internal reality. In *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 11, paragraph 2, it says, "Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification; yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love." So dead faith doesn't have fruit that is coming from it—true, spiritual fruit that the Bible describes for us.

And that brings us then to the fruit of faith. In *Westminster Confession*, chapter 14, paragraph 2, it says, "By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein; and acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life and that which is to come." So there's fruit that will be borne, where there's true saving faith. And the Confession says it includes the fruit of obedience. So not only hearing the word, but heeding the word. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 7, Jesus describes two different scenarios—those who build their house upon the sand, and the storms come, it collapses; those who build their house upon the rock, which endure all of the winds and the rain. And he makes the point that those who are building upon the rock are those who both hear and do the word. Similar to James 1, verse 22, where it says, "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves." And so there has to be this fruit of an obedient life, of walking in love for the Lord and his ways. It also speaks about believing, not only the promises which are found in the gospel, but believing the threatenings as well. We have to affirm those are true, and we need to respond in faith to those warnings that God gives us. Faith also has the fruit of submission to the Lord and to his word. So we're trusting him and coming under all of his dealings with us, acquiescing to his sovereign will in our life. That's the exercise of faith. In 1 Peter 5, verse 7, it says, "Casting all your care upon him, for he careth for you." Think back to the threefold aspect of faith. This is described in the believer, of course. They know that the Lord cares for them, more than they care for themselves. They affirm and assent that that is true. But it leads them to trusting him, to actually casting all of their care upon him.

Well, thirdly, we need to consider this doctrine polemically, and we'll note a few things here. First of all, the relationship of faith and works. And this will come out even more in the lecture on Justification. Faith and works—faith is receiving, works is attempting to give something to God. Works is an attempt to earn, whereas faith is a gift that the Lord gives to his people. Faith doesn't contribute anything—it receives everything from Christ, thus, magnifying God's grace. In Romans



4, verse 16, it says, “Therefore it is of faith, that it might be [by] grace.” He’s teaching that we are not saved by our own good deeds, we’re saved by receiving and resting on the Lord Jesus Christ, and that magnifies God’s grace. Ephesians 2, verse 9: It is “not of works, lest any man should boast.” All comes from God, and therefore, all glory must go to God.

Secondly, faith is never a blind leap in the dark. You know, the world often portrays faith as being ignorant, and irrational, and just merely wishing that something would be true. That’s not Biblical faith. It involves assured conviction. Hebrews 11, verse 1: It “is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Faith is exercised only when it is satisfied with the reliability of the object. So faith is the most credible and cogent thing we can do. We believe the word of God, which is true, and we receive and rest upon Christ, who is the Savior, as he is offered in the gospel. Faith is not the opposite of reason. It is the most intelligent exercise of the soul, in response to God.

Thirdly, we can circle back to this idea of those who would teach that faith is merely a knowledge and an assent to the truth, without trust. So there are those who will say, “Oh, you just need to believe, affirm that the gospel is true—Jesus died for sinners, I’m a sinner, therefore Jesus died for me,” and so on. But men can have a general conviction of the truthfulness of the Christian religion. They may affirm the Bible and its promises as the word of God. That’s not the same as saving faith. It must be faith in Christ that saves us, where we’re putting the whole weight of our confidence and souls on all that Christ is, and all that he has accomplished.

We can now draw some practical application from this doctrine for ourselves. First of all, it is not the amount of faith that saves. It is true saving faith that appropriates all that is found in Christ. You may ask yourself the question, “Why is this important? Why do we need this distinction?” Well, the reason is because even the smallest amount of true faith unites the sinner to Christ. And this can be helpful pastorally with weak lambs who are struggling with a sense of the inadequacy of their faith, and so on. And it reinforces the fact that it’s the sincerity of true faith that actually unites the sinner to Christ, not the amount of faith. Now having said that, we of course recognize that where there is more faith, there will be more comfort and assurance, and all that comes with that, and so we desire to have more faith for those reasons.

And that brings us, secondly, to the increase of our faith. Remember the words of the disciples to the Lord Jesus Christ, Lord, “Increase our faith.” There’s a need to grow in faith. Well, how to we do that? You’ll remember that it says that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of the Lord. And so, first of all, we need to be saturated in the word. No one’s going to grow in faith who’s neglecting their Bibles. We need to be immersed in all that the Scripture says. But even more than that, the increase of faith comes through the increase of the sight and knowledge of God in Christ. This is why Paul speaks about growing in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. The emphasis falls on the object of faith. We have faith in a great God, so great faith is actually just faith that is laying hold of a great God. And this matures as it develops into deeper, sweeter, greater, more expansive faith. And so, in order to grow in faith, to increase in faith, we need to be opening our Bibles, and reading them in copious amounts, and looking, and searching, and digging, and praying that the Lord would more and more show us himself and his glory in the face of the Lord Jesus Christ, that our faith might be drawn out toward him.

Thirdly, we need to underscore the importance of fruit—so, the fruit of faith. Given the reality of counterfeit faith, which we discussed earlier, self-examination is necessary. Second Corinthians 13, verse 5, says, “Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove”—or test—“your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?”



You'll see the same call to self-examination, for example, in 1 Corinthians, chapter 11. It's one of the components to preparation for the Lord's Supper. We're not to come to the Lord's Supper without first engaging in self-examination. And really, we're asking ourselves two questions. First of all, whether there is faith or not—whether there's true saving faith or not, in our souls. And then secondly, what are the degrees of faith that are found there. So in self-examination, we uncover, through the lens of Scripture, weaknesses, and sins, and shortcomings, areas of unbelief and so on, that we're to be bringing to the Lord. And this indispensable component of the Christian life, self-examination, is something we sing about. We sing about it in Psalm 26, verse 2. We sing about it in Psalm 139, verse 23, and so on. So we're asking whether we have saving faith, and the degrees of faith.

The fruit of faith relates to things like obedience. "Bring forth fruit meet for repentance," John the Baptist said. There should be the evidence of an obedient heart and life. They will include love for Christ—that's a fruit; love for the word, love for the Sabbath day, love for God's law, love for the brethren, and so on. These are the fruits of faith. It would include being joined with gospel repentance, and things like the fruit of hope and joy. There is joy in believing, as the Bible tells us. So these are fruits. We're to be cultivating this gospel fruitfulness, in the exercise of saving faith.

Well, in conclusion, in this lecture, we have considered an introduction to what the Bible teaches about Saving Faith. Saving conversion, we've learned, consists of faith and repentance. So in the next lecture, we will consider together, with the Lord's help, the doctrine of Repentance.

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

## *Module 5 ~ Lecture 5*

# The Doctrine of Repentance

Have you ever been on a trip, only to discover at some point that you are lost? You may have been traveling by car, or bicycle, or public transport, or even walking. You were heading blissfully down the road, thinking all was well. You felt certain that you were moving toward your desired destination. Then you began to pass landmarks that indicated something was wrong. You may have felt disoriented or alarmed. Finally, you saw a sign with the correct destination, but it was pointed in the exact opposite direction from where you were headed. Well, what did you do? First, at your earliest opportunity, you stopped moving in the route you were traveling. Then you turned around—you did a 180° turn, and began moving in the opposite direction—this time toward the right destination, not the wrong one.

Well, this provides a simple illustration of the nature of repentance. Unconverted men travel down the road of life, following their own sinful ways, while feeling certain that all is well. They believe that the route they have chosen will lead them to a desirable destination. But they could not be more wrong. They are lost, not following the map provided in God's word. They walk in the ways of sin, and the eternal misery of hell lies at the end of their journey. The preaching of the gospel exposes their misdirection. It alerts them to their grave mistake. The gospel serves as a bold sign pointing them in the opposite direction. Repentance includes turning from the sinful course we were on, and turning toward the Lord. It is therefore a change of spiritual direction, beginning in the heart and mind, and leading to a person's actions. It senses the alarm of their error, and flees from that path, and turns toward the Lord.

The series of lectures in this fifth module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the doctrine of Salvation. The purpose is for us to explore what the Bible teaches about how the Spirit applies the redemption of Christ to the individual soul of the believer. In the previous lecture, we considered the doctrine of Faith. In this present lecture, we'll consider the doctrine of Repentance. We will begin, as we have in all of these lectures, by considering a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of Repentance.

We read in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 3, verses 1 and 2, these words: "In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, and saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." In the opening of the New Testament, the first word in the call of the gospel was not "love" or something else—the first word was "repent." John the Baptist served as a hinge between the Old Testament and the New Testament—the last of the prophets before Christ, and the first person sent from God in the New Testament. And the dominant theme of his preaching ministry was repentance. God told his father, Zacharias, that John would turn many to the Lord, and that he would "make ready a people prepared for the Lord." We see that in Luke 1, verses 16

and 17. So in our text, Matthew 3, in verse 3, he quotes Isaiah, saying, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

Well, as you know, the shortest distance between two places is a straight line. Repentance clears the way, and makes the path straight between God and the repentant person. It is turning into that path. So John came preaching, as Mark 1, verse 4 says, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Note that repentance is connected to forgiveness. And so we read, in verses 5 and 6, of Matthew 3, that many of the common people came confessing their sins. So confession of sin is another element of repentance. But John also confronted boldly the Pharisees and Sadducees who resisted his message. In verses 7 and 8, he said, “O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance.” So we learn that true repentance always bears fruit and comes with evidence.

But repentance was not a unique message confined to John the Baptist’s ministry. When Jesus appeared for the first time in his public ministry, the first word in his message was “repent.” In the next chapter, Matthew 4, verse 17, it says, “From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Like John, he makes clear that there are two kingdoms, and sinners must turn from the kingdom of darkness and of Satan and of the world, and turn to the kingdom of God and heaven. We also note in Mark 1, verse 15, that Christ says, “Repent, and believe the gospel.” So he links repentance together with faith. These are the two parts of conversion that we saw in the last lecture. When Jesus prepared and then sent out the twelve disciples, what did they do? Mark 6:12 says, “And they went out, and preached that men should repent.”

And this continued through the New Testament. At Pentecost, in Acts 2, verse 38, we read: “Then Peter said unto them, Repent.” He said the same thing in the next chapter, Acts 3, verse 19; Acts 8, verses 20 to 23. Even in his epistles, like 2 Peter 3, verse 9, and so on. And the same is true of Paul’s ministry. For example, in Acts 17, verses 30–31; or chapter 20, verses 18 to 21; chapter 26, verses 14 to 20; we could go on and on. This is true to the end of the Bible. You come to the last book, in Revelation, and in chapter 2, verses 4 and 5, Jesus calls the church at Ephesus to repent. And then, as you read his words to the other churches in Asia, in chapter 2 and 3, he frequently repeats that call to repentance.

And so the place of repentance, we can see, is indispensable to the doctrine of Salvation. Well, this introduces us to the importance of the doctrine of Repentance. In the remainder of this lecture, we’ll explore what the Bible teaches us about the nature of repentance and it’s place within the doctrines of Salvation.

And so, secondly, we’ll consider a doctrinal exposition of this truth regarding repentance. And we’ll begin, first of all, with a definition of the nature of repentance. Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 15, paragraphs 1 and 2, says this: “Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ....By it,”—that is, by repentance—“a sinner, out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature and righteous law of God, and upon the apprehension of his mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavouring to walk with him in all the ways of his commandments.” So there you have the full sweep of what the word “repentance” means. Repentance is turning. It is a change of direction. On one hand, it sees, and senses, and grieves over the evil of personal sin, and on the other hand, it sees the mercy in Christ, and it turns from sin to God, walking in his ways. And this is not limited then to just the knowledge of sin. It must include an apprehension of the mercy that is to be found in Christ. Why? Because

no one will turn toward something that they think will destroy them. They're not going to turn from sin toward something they think will destroy them. There is both a warning and a wooing, or drawing, of the sinner. Romans 2, verse 4, says, "Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?" The sight of God's goodness leads to repentance. Well, repentance is not just something experienced at the beginning of the Christian life, when the soul is converted. Repentance characterizes the whole of the Christian life, from beginning to end. The believer continues, day by day, to turn from sin, to God, throughout their days.

Secondly, repentance affects all the faculties of the soul. So you think of the mind. In repentance, there is conscious knowledge of the nature and consequences of sin. This includes the recognition of personal guilt, and helplessness, and utter defilement. It also affects the will, where there is a disposition to flee from sin, and to seek pardon and cleansing. Without this change of purpose, there's no Biblical repentance. And it even affects the affections. There is a felt sorrow for sin and revulsion to it. You see that in Isaiah's experience, in Isaiah 6, verse 5: "Woe is me! . . . I am a man of unclean lips" from a "people of unclean lips."

Thirdly, man's act of repentance does not, in itself, save him. So repentance is not a work or a contribution that earns anything before God. Repentance is a grace—a gift given by God, just like we saw with faith. As Acts 11, verse 18, says, "Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life." And so, we're taught to pray in the language of Lamentations, chapter 5, verse 21, "Turn thou us unto thee, O LORD, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old." So repentance doesn't actually merit salvation, but it is absolutely necessary for salvation. Jesus said, in Luke 13:5, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." We either repent or perish. Just as with faith, salvation is not possible without repentance. Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 15, paragraph 3, says, "Although repentance be not to be rested in, as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God's free grace in Christ; yet is it of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it."

So fourthly, let's think about some of the details, some of the components of gospel repentance. It includes, first of all, a sight of sin. Do you remember the prodigal son? He goes off, in Luke 15, and he turns in to wicked ways and following evil courses. And we're told that at the turning point, what happens? "He came to himself," the passage says. He came to himself, before he came to the Lord. When he came to himself, he saw, "I have sinned"—sinned against God, and against my father, and so forth. He had a sight of sin, which was part of what brought about the turn, the change of direction, in returning to his father's house. And so, repentance means recognizing the plague of your own heart. We sing of this in Psalm 38, verse 4, "as a heavy burden they are too heavy for me,"—speaking of sin. We feel them as a great weight. John Bunyan pictures this beautifully in his book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. And there is Christian coming out of the City of Destruction with this heavy burden upon his back.

Secondly, not only the sight of sin, it's also sorrow for sin. In Psalm 38, verse 18, it says, "I will be sorry for my sin." And the Hebrew word there signifies agony—something excruciating. Zechariah 12, verse 10, says, "They shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn." So there's sorrow—there's grief over it. And the bread of sorrow actually strengthens the heart—Psalm 104, verse 15. We're told that "They who sow in tears reap in joy"—Psalm 126, verse 5. Well, why would that be the case? Why would tears bring joy? Why is it that sorrow strengthens? The answer is, because it makes Christ precious. This sight and sorrow for sin elevates and magnifies how invaluable, and beautiful, and sufficient, and satisfying the Lord Jesus Christ is.

A third component is the confession of sin—1 John 1, verse 9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness,”—if we confess our sins. So confession—what is that? To confess something is to say the same as another. So when we confess our sins, we’re saying about our sins the same thing that God says about them. We’re viewing them, defining them, speaking of them, in terms of what God sees of them. And that’s, of course, revealed to us in the Holy Scripture. That confession of sin leads us to charging ourself, and clearing God. Confession is also specific—confessing specific sins. We read in the book of Proverbs, “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.” So not hiding them or covering them, but uncovering them and forsaking them. This is something that gives great glory to God, when we’re charging ourselves and clearing the Lord, we’re glorifying him in our confession of sin. When Joshua confronted Achan, in Joshua 7, verse 19, he began what he said, with these words, “My son, give, I pray thee, glory to the LORD God of Israel, and make confession unto him.”

Fourthly, there is shame for sin. Ezekiel 43, verse 10, “That they may be ashamed of their iniquities.” So this involves seeing the guilt of sin against God and against his law; seeing the treason of sin, of engaging in rebellion against the Lord. It’s shame for our ingratitude. Here is God who’s created us, and given us all things, and heaped bounty upon us, and yet we have turned against him, rather than turning to him. We’ve been utterly ungrateful, and it’s shameful to think about it, to think about the dishonor that we’ve brought to his name. Sin should cause us to blush. In fact, when people are unable to blush, that’s a serious problem, isn’t it, in the consideration of their sin.

A fifth component is hatred of sin. Ezekiel 36, verse 31, says, “Ye...shall lothe yourselves... for your iniquities.” We’re to hate all sin, in all of its forms, and in all of its expressions. Why? Because we see sin as the antithesis—the opposite of God. It is what is utterly opposed to all that is to be found in God and in his nature. So there’s a hatred for it. The believer also hates it because they see what it cost the Lord Jesus Christ. There he is crucified, the Lord of Glory, the Lamb of God. And why? He’s dying for sin. Sin—the sins of God’s elect people have brought about this horrific event. So you either love God and hate sin, or you love sin and hate God. The Bible doesn’t give us middle ground there. For that reason, the believer should constantly say, “It is better to suffer than to sin.” Certainly, that was the thinking of the martyrs, who wouldn’t deny the Lord Jesus Christ. It’s better to suffer than to sin.

A sixth component is that repentance is God-centered. Remember Psalm 51. David has committed adultery, and he’s committed murder. And yet, in the opening verses of Psalm 51, he says, “Against thee...have I sinned...and thee only...and done this evil in thy sight.” Yes, he’s sinned against Bathsheba, and Uriah, and his family, and the nation of Israel, and so on, but what was all absorbing to him? The fact that his sin was against God. God is the One who looms large before the repentant sinner. It is God-centered.

Seventhly, repentance includes turning from sin to God. In Joel 2, verse 12, we read, “Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart.” That Hebrew word for “turn” is the most frequently-used word for “repentance” in the Old Testament. The idea of turning from sin, and turning to the Lord. Hosea 14, verse 8—really, Hosea 14 as a whole is a beautiful chapter, if you want to understand repentance, you read it from beginning to end. It has all the various components. But here, in terms of turning away from sin, verse 8 says, “Ephraim shall say, What have I to do any more with idols?” So it’s turning with the heart, in all of our life, in all of our actions, unto God, out of love for him, and out of dependence upon his mercy. Well, those are a few of the components that belong to repentance.



Next, we can think also about what the Bible teaches regarding counterfeit repentance. So in 2 Corinthians 7, verses 8 to 11—this is an important passage—we see that there's a difference between worldly sorrow for sin, and godly sorrow for sin that leads to repentance. There's a difference—worldly sorrow versus godly sorrow. And in that passage, we're given a number of descriptions of what godly sorrow that does lead to repentance looks like. You should study that carefully on your own. But you'll recognize the fact that a person can have some sorrow for sin without ever turning from it to the Lord. Now this is true, of course, of unbelievers. It's true in degrees, even within the life of the believer—we'll be watchful against it.

There can also be a terror for sin, maybe a legal terror for sin, without a change of heart. And so, the conscience, when exposed to the law of God, can feel fearful and afraid. But that's not the same as repentance. Very interesting, the words, "I have sinned"—who used those words in the Bible? Well, it includes Pharaoh, he said, "I have sinned;" King Saul said, "I have sinned;" even Judas Iscariot, who betrayed the Lord, said, "I have sinned." There was all of that, without a change of heart, without repentance. Sometimes even, people can rely on resolutions against sin, without repentance. So they're determined, you know, "I'm going to stop doing these things, and I'm going to walk in the way of God's law," and so on. And they can do that without being converted. In Jeremiah 2, verse 20, the Lord says, "Thou saidst, I will not transgress"—but then it goes on and speaks of them in these terms, "every green tree thou wanderest, playing the harlot." And so they're making resolutions without repentance. And sometimes this is motivated by self-love. These resolutions are motivated by self-love. That is certainly the case with King Ahab. It was love for himself that he walked softly. There is also a counterfeit in terms of partial repentance, leaving only some sinful ways. And the way in which this expresses itself is often by exchanging one set of sins for another set of sins, maybe the old sins for new sins. And so, a person may stop their drunkenness, but then they replace it with another sin of habitual lying, or something else. That's not repentance—it's only partial repentance.

You'll note that worldly sorrow can include lots of other things. There can be temporary repentance. That was Herod—he loved to hear the preaching of John the Baptist, but whatever experience we observe there, it didn't lead to actual repentance. Or it can be seen in blame-shifting. So we've sinned, but we blame our sin on someone else. You see that at the beginning of the Bible, where Adam blames Eve, and Eve blames the serpent, and so on. Or it can be a reaction only to the consequences of sin, and not the guilt of sin. So we're sad about what this sin has done, but not the sin itself. That was true of Cain; it was also true of King Saul. It can be external, without coming from the heart. Jesus warns of the Pharisees, that they disfigure their faces—there's this kind of outward humility, and so on, without true repentance. And it can also be self-centered. You see this with Simon the Sorcerer, in Acts, chapter 8. So these are warnings about counterfeit repentance.

Thirdly, we can consider this doctrine polemically, very briefly. And the first thing that we need to recognize is, in our own day, the utter neglect of the call to repentance. Within the broader church, you will hear people speaking about the need to be renewed, and the need to be refreshed, and the need for this and that. But you'll be listening in vain, in many cases, for the need of repentance. And yet, as we noted from the beginning of this lecture, this is an emphasis within the Bible, and the preaching ministry of John the Baptist, Christ, the apostles, and so on. And so, this needs to be a feature. As we saw in the Westminster Confession, every minister is required to preach the necessity of repentance—to call men to turn from their sins unto the Lord.

Secondly, there can be an underestimating of repentance. This would be the opposite error—underestimating repentance. Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 15, paragraph 4, says, "As

there is no sin so small but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent.” This is a message of hope, where the Lord says, for those who come penitently, and who come repentant, with gospel repentance, unto the Lord, no matter how great their sins are—it can be like the Apostle Paul, who was attacking Christ and persecuting his people, and seeking to destroy the church—that despite all of the weight of his own sin, which was a weight that would crush a world under its weight and grind it to powder, he received mercy, in coming by faith and repentance to the Lord Jesus Christ. And that hope must be held out in the heralding of the gospel.

Thirdly, we need to reject the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Sacrament of Penance. So they’ll take the word “repentance,” the Biblical notion of repentance, and they twist and distort it, and they’ve transformed it into what they call the Sacrament of Penance. And penance, rather than being gospel evangelical repentance, is something entirely different—the idea of physically afflicting yourself, as a way of trying to make yourself feel something about the sorrow of sin. That’s external. That’s not from the heart. But furthermore, they view penance as something that contributes to their earning or meriting salvation from the Lord. They think that this penance will somehow earn favor with God. And that, of course, undermines the complete work of the Lord Jesus Christ, which alone is able to save, and which is received by grace in the Lord. They turn it into a works-oriented righteousness. And so we have to be alert to that, and opposing that from the Scriptures.

Fourthly, we can now draw some practical applications from this doctrine for ourselves. First of all, we should seek to repent for specific sins. Westminster Confession of Faith, paragraph 5 has some really helpful words. It says, “Men ought not to content themselves with a general repentance, but it is every man’s duty to endeavour to repent of his particular sins particularly”—repent of his particular sins particularly. So this is a call to be specific. In our repentance before the Lord, as we’re searching our hearts under the light of God’s word, it’s not this vague notion of “Well, I am generally a sinful person,” and acknowledging that before the Lord. But under the preaching of his word, and the reading of his word, as the Lord is bringing specific sins to light, we’re to take those specific sins to the Lord, and we are to confess them, and we are to repent and turn from them to the Lord, in apprehension of his mercy. So it’s specific sin. It’s not to say that every sin that we’ve ever committed has to be repented of—well, that’s human impossibility. We have sins of ignorance even, that we’re unaware of. But as the Lord gives light to us, we are to repent of the sins that he brings to light. That’s true in terms of our relationship to other people as well. We can be tempted to neglect owning our sin. So, you’ve sinned against a brother, and you go to them and say something like, “I’m sorry.” Well, all that’s really communicating is that you feel badly about what’s happened. It would be more appropriate for you to go and actually own the sin—to say, “Look, when I said this,” or, “When I did this, I was wrong. I sinned against you, and I sinned against the Lord, in a specific way, and I’m coming to ask you to forgive me.” So you can see how, in the relationship with the Lord, that flows over even into the expressions of repentance in our relationship to fellow men.

Secondly, there is a place for public repentance. You can read about this in Westminster Confession, chapter 15, paragraph 6. I won’t read it to you here—it’s rather lengthy—but you can refer to it on your own time—the place of public repentance. So just as men have private sins that they seek the Lord’s pardon for, when the church as a whole, for example, is engaged in sin, or when a specific individual is engaged in a sin that is publically known to others, he should be prepared to express that repentance publically. So private sins repented of privately, public sins repented of publically. When there’s a person who’s committed perhaps a scandalous and serious sin that’s

known broadly within the community or church, they ought to be prepared to confess and repent of that before those who know it.

Thirdly, there's corporate repentance. By corporate repentance, it can refer to the family, it can refer to the church, it can refer to a nation. In Joel 2, and verse 15 and following, it says, "Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly: gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children"—it goes on later to say, "Let the priests, the minister of the LORD, weep between the porch and the altar, and let them say, Spare thy people, O LORD." So there's place for the people of God as a whole confessing their sins. During times of spiritual declension, and the church may hold a fast day. And people apart are doing work on their own soul in their homes, and they come together in the public assembly, in public worship, and there's preaching on the topic, and there's corporate prayer, where their corporate sins are being acknowledged before the Lord. This has been true through the history of the world, and often associated with times of revival.

Fourthly, and lastly, in Luke 15, verse 10, Jesus said, "Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth." And you think about this for a second. There, perhaps the church is gathered, a very small group of people, maybe in a remote location that's unseen and unknown by men. And there in the quietness of the congregation, the minister is preaching, and God works by his Spirit in the soul of one sitting in the pew. And by the Spirit, they're brought to faith, and they're brought to repentance, and they repent before the Lord, in the quietness of that assembly within the cry of their own heart. You know what? That's not going to be reported the next day in the newspapers. It's not going to be broadcast on the internet, or in the news. It will go unnoticed by the world. And Jesus says in this passage, that this enumerable throng of overwhelmingly powerful beings—the angels in heaven, that even over the repentance of a single sinner, the whole of heaven breaks open, as it were, in thunderous and joyous shouts in praise to God. So that the heavens are lit up with expressions of praise over the repentance of a single sinner.

Well, Jesus providing us with that window should influence us. It should influence how we view the repentance of a single sinner. That may be true for ourselves—the joy that comes in being brought to repentance before God. It should be true when we see it anywhere and everywhere in another person. This is what is truly significant in the world. This is what is truly exciting. This is something that is truly invigorating, for the people of God, to see men and women, boys and girls, being brought to repentance.

Well, in conclusion, we've noted that saving conversion consists of faith and repentance. In this lecture, we've considered an introduction to what the Bible teaches about the second component, namely, Repentance. And now we're going to move on. So in the next lecture, we will consider, with the Lord's help, the doctrine of Justification.

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

## *Module 5 ~ Lecture 6*

### **The Doctrine of Justification**

Zechariah 3, verses 1 to 5, provides us with a wonderful picture. You have an account of Joshua the high priest standing before the Lord, and Satan standing at Joshua's right hand to resist him. The devil's resistance is not a surprise really, because we know that Revelation 12, verse 10, says that he is the accuser of the brethren. Then we see it elsewhere. For example, we see Satan bringing accusations against Job; other examples could be cited. Joshua the high priest is described as clothed with filthy garments, depicting his many sins, which of course provides a cause for accusation. But notice, the Lord rebukes Satan, and defends Joshua as a brand plucked from the fire. And what does the Lord do? The Lord says, in verses 4 and 5, "Take away the filthy garments from him. And unto him he said, Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment. And I said, Let them set a fair mitre upon his head. So they set a fair mitre upon his head, and clothed him with garments. And the angel of the LORD stood by." Here, Joshua's sins are removed before God's sight and presence. And instead, he's clothed with clean, beautiful garments that are supplied by God himself. So this is not Joshua changing his garments, or somehow trying to present himself beautifully, but it is God supplying something for him. And it provides a very vivid picture of the doctrine of Justification—the Lord coming to a sinner, and plucking them as a brand from the fire. That's God's initiative and sovereign grace, in drawing a sinner to himself, and then this natural pollution and defilement—the stains of sin that cover the believer, and that make him filthy in the Lord's sight—the Lord takes away. He removes those iniquities, and instead, he himself clothes his people with beautiful garments, so that they're able to stand acceptably in his sight.

Well, how important is Justification to the doctrine of Salvation? Martin Luther, the great German Reformer, said that Justification by faith alone is the article upon which the church stands or falls. It is the battleground of the gospel. It was in Luther's day, and it continues to be in our own day.

This series of lectures in this fifth module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the doctrine of Salvation. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about how the Spirit applies the redemption of Christ to the individual soul of the believer. In this present lecture, we'll consider the doctrine of Justification. And we'll begin, as has been our pattern, by considering a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of Justification.

We read in Romans 3, verses 21 and 22, these words: "But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference." In the opening of Romans, in chapter 1, verses 16 and 17, Paul spoke of the gospel as the

“power of God unto salvation.” He says, “For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.” Then, beginning in the next verse, chapter 1, verse 18, through chapter 3, verse 20, which is the verse right before our text, he describes the bad news for fallen, sinful men, both Jews and Gentiles, demonstrating their moral bankruptcy, and personal depravity. He insists on the inability of sinful men to achieve salvation by earning it through obedience to the law. He states that through the law, every mouth is stopped, and all become guilty before God. And then he concludes, in chapter 3, verse 20, “Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.” Well, the picture is bleak. How can God remain just, and anyone be saved, in light of their sin? God is just, and perfect righteousness is required of man for acceptance before him. Furthermore, the Lord must punish all of man’s sins. Well that sets before us the dilemma: holy God, sinful man—how can these two be brought together?

Well, Paul then turns to the good news, in our text, chapter 3, verses 20 and 21. And he expounds the doctrine of Justification by faith alone, from Romans 3, verse 21, all the way through Romans 5. He speaks, in the words that we cited at the beginning, he speaks of the righteousness of God without the law, that is, without man’s own record of perfect obedience to the law. He says further, in verse 28, “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified...without the deeds of the law.” So, what is needed, and what the Lord provides, is a righteousness that is found outside of man, not within man. Well, where exactly is that located then? It is a righteousness that is secured in Jesus Christ. Christ is, for the believer, the Lord our righteousness. Christ obeyed God’s law with perfect conformity at all points, without sin. And as a substitute, he bore the full penalty and punishment for the sins, the lawbreaking, of the elect.

Well, how is it that sinners receive and benefit from Christ’s righteousness? Paul says in our text that it is by faith. Faith appropriates Christ, and all that he did in his saving work. Because it is by faith, and not by works or human merit, it is all of grace. God giving unmerited favor. In verse 24, Paul says, “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” Well this eliminates all proud boasting on man’s part, as you see in verse 27. So salvation in and through Christ answers our earlier question about how God can be just, and how man can still be saved. In verse 26, we read “that he”—that is, God—“might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.” So the doctrine of Justification provides the answer. God’s justice is upheld in Christ’s perfect righteousness, and the believer is justified on the basis of Christ’s righteousness, which the believer receives by faith alone, and thus by grace.

Well this introduces us, at least in a preliminary way to the importance of the doctrine of Justification. But we obviously need to further open up the details—what this means, and to clarify some important distinctions. And so in the remainder of this lecture, we’ll explore what the Scriptures teach about Justification, and its place within the doctrines of Salvation.

So that brings us, secondly, to considering a doctrinal exposition of Justification by faith alone. And we begin with a definition of the word “Justification.” Justification is not a word that people use in their ordinary speech at home and in the neighborhood, but it’s a theological term found in the Bible, and we need to define it. Well, we’ll come to the Westminster Confession of Faith later in this lecture, but we have a concise definition in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 33: “What is justification?” The answer is, “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.” So you can see, Justification answers the question: “How can unjust sinners be made right in the sight of a just and holy God?” Unjust sinners need



righteousness above all else, and God supplies this righteousness by Christ. So Justification is a legal term describing a legal transaction. It refers to a one-time, forensic act of God, declaring a person righteous before God and his tribunal of justice. So it's one time—it's a single act. It's not something that's ongoing. Justification is not a process. So it's one time, but it's also for all time. So once God brings justification, it's permanent. It cannot be lost.

And you'll notice, man is not made righteous. So it's not referring to an inherent righteousness; it's not referring to a change in his internal character, like we have, for example, in Sanctification, which we'll consider in the next lecture. He is declared righteous. So he's declared righteous; that means it's describing his status—his legal status before God. Well how is it that he's declared righteous? Because obviously, he's unrighteous. It is through the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer. So the word "imputation" means "to attribute to," or "to credit to one's account," or "to reckon." And this is essential for understanding the gospel. Christ's righteousness is credited legally to the account of the believer, so that it is viewed legally as his own.

You'll remember from an earlier lecture in a previous module, the Bible teaches three imputations. There is the imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity. Then there is the imputation of the elect's sin to Christ. Christ isn't himself sinful, but he has it credited to his account, so he can bear the penalty for it. And then thirdly, there is Christ's righteousness, which is imputed to the elect. The word "imputation" is used several times, for example, in Romans 4. And you see the concept in many places, like 2 Corinthians 5, verse 21, where he who knew no sin became sin, "that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." Here's how the Westminster Confession, chapter 11, paragraph 1 puts it. It says, "he also freely justifieth: not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous: not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone."

So let's flesh this out a little further. One important distinction is the difference between the ground of justification and the instrument of justification. When you conflate these, or confuse them, or if you replace them with one another, you end up in all sorts of serious error that undermines the gospel. So we need to understand the difference between the ground of justification, and the instrument. We'll start with the ground—the ground of justification. And we'll state what it's not, and then state what it is.

So the ground of justification is not righteousness generated in us. So as we noted earlier, it's not God making us or putting righteousness into our moral character. The ground is also not righteousness produced by us. So it's not our attempts at obedience to the law, and our human merit, as if we are somehow paying for the ability to be justified before God. And especially important, it is not our faith in Christ either. The ground of justification is not our faith. If that were the case, then a person would be trusting in their faith, rather than trusting in Christ. And you can see the difference. It would be viewing faith as the one thing that does contribute to earning acceptance before God. So faith is not the ground. We'll come to see more in a moment about what it is. Again, Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 11, paragraph 1 says, "Not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience, to them as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith: which faith they have not of themselves; it is the gift of God."

So we've talked about what the ground of justification is not. Well, what is it then? Well first of all, it is an alien righteousness. What that means is, it is a righteousness that is outside of us. It comes from outside of us. And more specifically, it is the righteousness of Christ—so Christ's perfect righteousness and the record of his perfect obedience to all the demands of the law. When

Jesus obeyed the law, he did so as a substitute on behalf of his people, so that there would be, in humanity, a perfect record of righteousness that's then credited to the account of his people. He also did so in satisfying the demands of a broken law, in bearing the sins in punishment for his people. So this ground of righteousness is the righteousness of Christ himself. Westminster Confession, chapter 11, paragraph 3 says, "Christ, by his obedience and death, did fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to his Father's justice in their behalf. Yet, inasmuch as he was given by the Father for them, and his obedience and satisfaction accepted in their stead, and both freely, not for any thing in them, their justification is only of free grace; that both the exact justice and rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners." So the question is, "What is the ground of justification?" It is the righteousness of Christ.

Then next, we can consider the instrument of justification, and the instrument is faith alone. Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 11, paragraph 2, says "Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification." So the instrument for justification, first of all, it is not justification on account of faith, as it were, in payment for faith. As we noted, faith is not the ground. Faith is also not the consequence of justification. It's not something that comes as a result of being justified. No, it comes first. It is by faith alone that we're justified. So what is it? Faith is the vehicle, it is the instrument, the means, through which we receive the merits of Christ's righteousness. God decreed in eternity that the elect would be justified. But it is applied—they actually become justified—in time, when they receive Christ by faith. And so faith is the way of appropriating the merits of Jesus Christ. It is believing, it is trusting, it is receiving and resting in what Christ alone has done. We saw that more fully in our lecture on faith.

But it is also faith alone—justified by faith alone. That means, faith alone, without the deeds of the law, or without human merit, or without our good works contributing anything. This is important because of the nature of faith. Faith doesn't bring anything to the table. Faith doesn't contribute anything to the Lord. Faith is a grace through which we are receiving something. We're merely receiving Christ, and the merits of Christ, and all that he has accomplished. And so it's perfectly suited to show the graciousness of the gospel. It's not faith and repentance, faith and good works, faith and, as we just said, sanctification—it's faith alone.

Next, we should consider then the relationship of justification to good works. Justification is by grace alone, received through faith alone, mediated through Christ alone. And so it is purely by free grace. Paul hammers this in his epistle to the Romans, in Galatians, and in many other places. It's not by works. Romans 4, verse 4, says, "Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt." In other words, if we're relying on works, then we're paying for something that then we're owed in return. Well we're not owed anything. We don't contribute anything. Works are the opposite of grace. And so, when you put these pieces together, you realize that it is not faith mixed with good works that then results in salvation, but rather, it is faith that results in justification, which in turn then bears the fruit of good works in sanctification. So the fruitfulness of sanctification must flow, by necessity, out of justification. But it is by faith alone, not by faith plus other things. So it's faith alone, but not faith that remains alone. Westminster Confession, chapter 11, paragraph 2: "Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification; yet it is not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love." We'll talk more about this more in a moment, and then, in our lecture on Sanctification, more fully.

Next, we have the moral impetus of Justification. Here's the problem: Roman Catholics and

others will say, “This doctrine of Justification by faith, it will result in licentiousness. If people only receive justification by faith, without anything that they have to do, then they’ll feel as if good works don’t matter at all, and that therefore, they can live as they wish and do what they want. And it will result in moral degradation.” Well this is a false charge. What does the Bible say? The Bible says quite the contrary. It says, those who are justified have all sorts of things that flow from that. You look at Romans 5, verse 1 and following, it says, “Therefore being justified by faith”—and then it lists the things that come in the wake of it—we have peace with God, access into this grace wherein we stand, rejoice in hope, glory in tribulation, and so on.

What the Roman Catholics have missed, in their objection to Justification by faith, is understanding the impact that it has upon the believer subjectively. When the believer comes in to the gospel and receives Christ, and realizes that everything has been supplied by the Lord, that they are filthy, polluted sinners, who deserve hell, that God has mercifully provided a way of acceptance before him, through the work of Jesus Christ, which is given to them freely, and received by faith, the response that the believer has, the impact that produces is love—overwhelming gratitude! What a God! And what a Savior! What wonderful riches of grace that are to be found in him! And there’s gratitude that comes as a result, and there’s an intense love for him. And those are motivations—powerful motivations, that then fuel their desire to glorify him, and to worship him, and to please him, and to serve him, and to obey him, and to follow him, and so on. Well, these motivations of gratitude and love are far more powerful than the servile obedience that Roman Catholics would have us rely upon. “I have to do something, in order to somehow have enough good works to please God, and be accepted before him.” No, gratitude and love are far more powerful in the soul of the believer.

Well that brings us, thirdly, to considering this doctrine polemically, and we have to address some of the issues with Rome—Roman Catholicism, because at the Reformation, this doctrine of Justification by faith ended up being the context for serious conflict. You’ll notice, in what we’ve covered in this lecture, the difference between Rome and Biblical, gospel truth—Protestantism. Rome says that justification is an infused grace. So God comes and he infuses grace into the soul, and this is what lies behind their whole system of sacerdotalism. You have the seven sacraments, and so what happens, people come and they partake of the idolatrous Mass, and they believe that by taking the Mass, they’re actually physically eating the body and blood of Jesus, and that infuses grace into their soul, and so on. And the same is true of penance, and holy unction, and so on. Over against that, the Bible teaches, as we saw in Westminster Confession, chapter 11, paragraph 1, that it is imputed righteousness—imputed grace, not an infused grace. So that difference is the difference between whether we have the gospel or forsake the gospel. That’s why Luther said, upon this article the church stands or falls.

Furthermore, Roman Catholics believe that baptism is the instrument of justification, that God washes away original sin in baptism, and that is then followed by the sacrament of penance. So the ongoing sins have to be dealt with by ongoing penance in the soul. What does this do? Having baptism and penance and other things takes away the doctrine of Justification by faith alone, and it introduces works, so that we’re justified by the things we do—baptism, penance, taking the Mass, unction, so on and so forth. So it’s actually undermining the gospel. It’s the very thing that Paul was confronting in his epistles with the Judaizers, who wanted to be able to rely on some merit in themselves.

Well, what do we do with the fact that there seems to be this apparent contradiction? Because on one side, in Galatians 2, verse 16, you have Paul writing, and he says this same thing in many

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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## *Module 5 ~ Lecture 7*

# The Doctrine of Adoption

Imagine a poor, poverty-stricken boy, living in a garbage dump of a major city. He has to fend for himself day by day, picking through trash to find scraps to eat, while wearing nothing but a few rags. He has no shelter, no possessions, no protection, no future, no hope. On top of that, he's forced into a slavish service of a dangerous criminal, who teaches him to lie and steal on his behalf, but who nevertheless provides him with nothing for his work. The boy knows nothing of love. Then along comes a gentleman who notices and takes interest in the boy. That interest leads to a decision to take him home and to adopt him into his own family. Legal documents are completed to secure the arrangement. Soon the boy discovers that this is no ordinary man. He is the king of the realm. And so, a magnificent carriage comes to escort the boy to his new home. He passes through the enormous gates of the king's estate, and taken into the palace, and there's marble on the floor, and statues, and gold, and all sorts of things that he's never seen before. He's escorted up into the sprawling suite that will be his bedroom. Several servants are assigned to wait upon him. And so he's bathed, and he's dressed in rich apparel, and given all of the comforts that come with that. He's then taken into the banquet hall, and he's given a seat at a table that is sprawling with scrumptious and copious amounts of food. They explain to him that he has a new name, and that he has a new status as a prince in the household. From now on, he'll have protection, he'll have provision, he'll have personal servants, and as a prince, he'll have a future inheritance that includes the best of the kingdom. But most of all, he will have the unrestrained love of the king, as his father, including limitless access to him and to his throne, and all the affection and tender care he can imagine.

Well sounds amazing. Indeed, it sounds too good to be true. But it is actually far less than God provides in the spiritual adoption of his children. His people are born into sin. They're born into the poverty of sin. They're living lives of rebellion against him. They're, in fact, children of the devil, the most evil of tyrants. And they have all of the depravations that come with that sinful status. And God comes and takes the initiative, sovereignly, by his grace, and he adopts a sinner into his family, and bestows upon them the privileges of the new status, as a member of the household and a child of the living God, gives them a new name, provides protection and provision, and indeed promises an eternal inheritance in what is to come. And above all that, the believer has limitless access to the Father, and to his throne, and all of the tender affection of a heavenly Father.

Well this introduces us, at least in a cursory way, to this doctrine of Adoption. The series of lectures in this fifth module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the doctrine of Salvation. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about how the Spirit applies the redemption of Christ to the individual soul of the believer. So in this present lecture, we'll consider the doctrine of Adoption. And we'll begin by considering, first of all, a passage of Scripture to open up

our consideration of this doctrine.

We read, in 1 John 3, verses 1 to 3: “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure.”

Notice a few things briefly about this passage. It begins with the word, “Behold.” So here is the Apostle John, and he’s saying, “See! Look at this!”—the language of astonishment. “Can you see the manner of love the Father has bestowed upon his believing people? If you see it, you will be amazed at how wonderful it truly is.” Why? “Because we have been called,” he says, “the sons of God.” Here is God—he is the eternal One. He is the One dwelling in the inapproachable light of holiness. And in contrast, we are specs of dust, just creatures. No, it’s far worse. We are sinful dust who have hated and rebelled, and dishonored him. It would be an astounding condescension, even for God to make us slaves. But he does far more. He adopts, and he brings believers into the immediate orbit of his own family, bestowing all the privileges of sonship upon those who are so unworthy. And so, John says, “What amazing manner of love God has shown—the love of adopting sons.”

You’ll also notice that the sinful world cannot see this at all. They don’t know these realities. They see believers, but do not know them for what they truly are—children of the living God, and members of God’s household. They don’t know God himself, and therefore, they cannot truly know or understand his children. Notice that this privilege of adoption is a present reality. We are now called the sons of God. The believer is right here, and right now, a son or daughter of God. It’s an accomplished fact, and an irreversible status. When the soul comes to saving faith in Christ, they are adopted at that moment, and remain sons forever. You’ll also notice that their status as adopted sons is distinct from their internal character. However, as adopted sons, God carries on the work of transforming them into the family likeness. Sanctification, which we’ll be considering in the next lecture, flows from adoption. The believer is made more and more into the likeness of their elder brother, Jesus Christ, by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. But that work remains incomplete in this world. The best is saved for last. At the last day, the believer will be made perfect, sinlessly conformed to Christ’s likeness. They shall see him, as John says, They shall see him as he is, and in seeing, shall be made like him. Knowing that this privilege awaits the adopted child of God in the future, it fuels their present pursuits of growth in grace and Christian maturity.

Well this introduces us to some of the privileges of the doctrine of Adoption. But we need to further open up the details and clarify some important distinctions. And so, in the remainder of this lecture, we’ll explore what the Bible teaches us about the place of Adoption within the doctrines of Salvation.

And so, secondly, we’ll consider a doctrinal exposition of Adoption. The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 12, is devoted to the doctrine of Adoption. It provides a helpful overview of what the Bible teaches. And here’s what it says: “All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth, in and for his only Son, Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption, by which, they’re taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God, have his name put on them, receive the Spirit of adoption, have access to the throne of grace with boldness, are enabled to cry, Abba, Father, are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by him, as by a father, yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption, and inherit the promises as heirs of everlasting salvation.” Well, that provides us a helpful overview of the doctrine.



Let's consider next the theological context. So how does Adoption fit within everything else that we've learned about the doctrines of Salvation. Well, we see that Adoption, like Justification, is a forensic, one-time act. So it's not an ongoing process. It's the saving action of becoming the sons of God. And so, it involves a change in the believer's legal status, so that those who were by nature children of the devil, become children of the living God. Now think of how this relates to several other components. We learned about Predestination in a previous course. There, God's sovereign and gracious election to choose a people for himself included the aim of adopting sinful slaves, and bringing them savingly into his family. Ephesians 1, verse 5, says, "Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will." We see something similar in Galatians 4:4. So Predestination included God's loving choice to save a people—included his intention to bring them into a state of adoption.

We can also think of Adoption in relationship to Justification. Historically, some theologians included Adoption under the heading of Justification. But as we see in the Westminster Confession of Faith, it's helpful to actually distinguish Adoption and Justification. How so? Well, Justification pertains to our being accepted as righteous, by the imputed righteousness of Christ, and thereby permits access into God's presence. Adoption, however, pertains to our acceptance as sons, whereby we are permitted into God's family. So they're distinct. Justification is distinct, but it cannot be separated, of course, from Adoption. You cannot have one without the other. They come together.

Think also about the relationship of Adoption to Regeneration, which we covered in a previous lecture. In John 1, verses 12 and 13, it says, "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." So Regeneration precedes Adoption. We're brought to life, and then Adopted. So Regeneration is a prerequisite to Adoption. Regeneration involves a new birth, whereas Adoption involves becoming sons. Regeneration gives us a new nature, Adoption gives us a new name. So the new birth enables us to be possessed by God in Adoption.

And then there's the relationship of Adoption to Sanctification, which we touched on a little earlier. Adoption is entry into God's family. Sanctification is the process of growing to look more like a part of the family—more like our elder brother, Christ. Adoption is a one-time act, Sanctification is an ongoing process.

Well all of this helps clarify the theological context of Adoption. But next, we need to consider the privileges of Adoption. And this takes us really into the heart of the doctrine. Remember in the beginning, John says, "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us." Well, here, we peer, as it were, more closely into the wonder of the privileges of Adoption. And there are several that I'll mention.

The first is that in Adoption, God's name is put on us. The prophet Jeremiah, chapter 14, verse 9, says, "Yet thou, O LORD, art in the midst of us, and we are called by thy name; leave us not." And you'll see this language elsewhere in the Bible, the fact that we are "called by thy name"—God's name. Even at the end of the Bible, in Revelation 3, verse 12, it speaks about how the believer in heaven is given a new name. So that's one aspect of Adoption—God puts his name on us. Just as when a child is adopted into a human family, they are given the last name, or the name of the family. So it is with the Lord.

Next, we have access to his throne with boldness. So he is a great King, the King of kings, the God of glory, and yet, as adopted sons and daughters, we can come to that throne with boldness. Hebrews 4, verse 16: "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain

mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” Ephesians 3, verse 12, tells us something similar. So you think of a little prince in a palace. Other people, they can’t just come into the throne room and speak to the king whenever they would like, but the son of the king can. So too with the believer.

Thirdly, in Adoption, the believer is enabled to cry, “Abba, Father.” Romans 8, verse 15: “But ye have received the Spirit of Adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.” Galatians 4, verse 6: “And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.” We’ll look in more detail at this in just a moment.

Another privilege of Adoption is that the believer is pitied, and protected, and provided for by a heavenly Father. We sing about this in Psalm 103, verses 13 and 14: “Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust.” You also have protection, Proverbs 14, verse 26: “In the fear of the LORD is strong confidence: and his children shall have a place of refuge.” Or you think of Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 6, where he’s speaking about our temporal needs, and he says you don’t need to worry about what you’re going to eat, and what you’re going to wear, and so on, you know, the Gentiles seek after those things, but your heavenly Father knows what you need, and he will provide these things, just as he does for the lily of the field, and the sparrow, and so on. Your Father will provide.

Another privilege of Adoption is that we are chastened, or disciplined by him. Hebrews 12, we read about this, in verse 5 and following: “And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.” It goes on in verse 11: “Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.” Well, discipline isn’t fun, but it is a privilege. And in Hebrews 12, he says there’s a difference between a son and someone who’s illegitimate. Right, you don’t discipline a child that lives down the street from you. They’re not your son or daughter, but you discipline the children in your own home. And so it is that the world doesn’t have the benefit of the Lord’s chastening, because they’re not sons and daughters of him. Whereas God loves his children so much that he’s going to train them, he’s going to chasten them, in order that they’ll be brought under that training to yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness. Discipline is a privilege.

Next, another privilege is that we’re never cast off by him—Lamentations 3, verse 31. Instead, the believer is sealed by the Lord to the last day—for example, Ephesians 4, verse 30. Another privilege is that he provides for his children an eternal inheritance. So Romans 8, verse 17: “And if children then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.” Galatians 4, verse 7, also ties Adoption to an inheritance. And you read about this inheritance in various places in the New Testament; 1 Peter 1, verse 4, it’s called “an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you.” Just as parents leave something for their children, they bequeath something to them when they die, our heavenly Father, who owns everything, he has promised an eternal inheritance in heaven that can’t be taken away.

And those are some of the privileges—not all of them, but some of the primary privileges of Adoption, and it shows us the wonder of it.

Next, we should consider the Spirit of Adoption. There’s two passages here that bring this out—the Spirit of Adoption. We alluded to them earlier. In Romans 8, verses 14 to 16, it says: “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the

spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.” Galatians 4, verses 5 and 6 is similar: “To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son in your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.” So notice, the Spirit of Adoption, there’s a few things we can learn here. First of all, this goes beyond bestowing privileges, which are objective—it goes beyond that—to the witness of the Holy Spirit to these facts. That’s something subjective. And this includes the creation of a filial trust and affection within God’s people. It also includes, however, the joint witness—the joint witness of our spirits with God’s Spirit that we are his children. God graciously stirs the heart of the believer to draw near to him, and to have confirmed that he is their Father. This is the Spirit of Adoption.

Thirdly, we need to consider this doctrine polemically, and there’s one thing we’ll focus on here for the sake of time. And it is what is the so-called universal Fatherhood of God. So adoption obviously assumes a relationship of father to children. And it’s important for us to think through what the Bible teaches about divine Fatherhood. The Fatherhood of God includes distinct concepts. And here’s the problem—the world, and many liberal theologians, unbelieving Bible scholars will speak about how God is the Father of humanity, that we are all his children, that all people are the children of God, and so on. That’s wrong, and it’s helpful to understand why it’s wrong, and we can do that by making some distinctions. There’s really three aspects, or types of Fatherhood, if you will, divine Fatherhood.

The first is the Trinitarian Father, so the first person of the Godhead is eternally the Father. You have Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. We’ve covered this in the lectures on the doctrine of God. This is an eternal position that the first person of the Trinity alone holds, within the inter-Trinitarian relationship of the Godhead—one God subsisting in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is the eternal Father of the Son and of the Spirit. That’s Trinitarian Father, if you will.

But then secondly, we have what could be called the Creator Father. So the Scripture does refer to God as a Father in his capacity as Creator and sustainer of the world, in just a few places. And in that case, it’s speaking of him as the originator of creation. He is the Creator, who has brought all things into existence by the word of his power. He is the origin. And so in that sense, he is Father. But liberal theologians have used these brief instances, which refer to God’s relation to creation, and have twisted them and distorted them into references to the redemptive sense of Adoption. So they’ve eliminated this aspect of the doctrine of Salvation, and stretched it out to include everybody. And that destroys a Biblical truth.

Because there’s a third aspect, and it’s the one we’re dealing with in this lecture, and that is God as an adoptive Father. God makes his elect his sons and daughters through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. And this distinguished them from the rest of the world. They’re brought into his own household. This is far more intimate and far more precious than what is indicated under his work of creation generally, and his work of providence. This is a work of Salvation that belongs to God’s people.

Fourthly, we can now draw some practical application to ourselves, thinking about the importance of Adoption in Christian experience. A few brief things here. First of all, as we saw at the beginning, Adoption staggers the imagination, because of its amazing condescension and depth of love. Our response to this doctrine should be wonder, because this is the pinnacle of gracious privileges, and the goal of redemption, as we have seen, and we should feel something of the amazement that comes with that.

It also has another impact upon us. The English Puritan, John Owen, wrote, “If the love of a father will not make a child delight in him, what will?” That’s a good question—a searching question. As we come under the power of this doctrine, as we meditate affectionately upon this doctrine, as we begin to explore its riches, the love of the Father is being opened up to us. And the response is that it should cause us to love him. We love him because he first loved us. It should cause us to delight in him. It should cause us to be wholeheartedly devoted to him, and to desire to glorify him with all that we have. He should be the object of all of our desires.

But it has another practical impact. In 1 Peter 5, verse 7, we’re told, “Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.” So when you begin to believe and see, and have confidence in the fact that God cares for you as a Father cares for his children, and far better, and far more—a heavenly Father for his adopted children, as we become persuaded in the depths of God’s tenderness, and attention, and affection, and care, it motivates us to then casting all of our cares, all of our anxieties, our concerns, our burdens, to cast those upon him. So that we come as little children with all of these struggles, and all of these worries, and all of these sorrows, and we bring them to the heavenly Father who cares, and we commit them to him. We roll them off of our shoulders, onto him. It’s a practical application of Adoption.

Another one—another practical application is a thankful responsiveness to chastening. No one likes chastening. It is painful. But when the Lord is chastening us in his Word, under preaching, chastening us in his providence, even in the case of church censure, there ought to be a thankfulness. Because, if you’re never disciplined by the Lord, Hebrews 12 tells us it’s because you’re not a son. The Lord chastens all whom he loves. And so we should be grateful that the Lord loves us enough not to allow us to stray, not to allow us to go off, but rather, to bring us back, and to train us, and tutor us, and correct us, and guide us in the ways of light, and life, and truth. We should be thankful for that. We should be responsive to that. We should come under the Lord’s chastening, and benefit, and learn from it—be trained by it.

Lastly, by way of practical application, the thought of Adoption fuels our worship, and prayers, and our whole outlook on life. What can trouble us? What can assail us, if I am a child of the great King? If I belong within the palace of the King? What is it?—he protects us, he provides for us, he is the One who shows affection for us. Well, this fuels our worship. It strengthens our whole outlook on life about even the things that are difficult around us. The wonder and glory of the doctrine of Adoption.

Well, in this lecture, we’ve considered an introduction to what the Bible teaches about Adoption. We’ve noted that Adoption conveys staggering privileges to those who receive salvation and become the children of the living God. The question remains: How do these children grow up into spiritual maturity? Well, in the next lecture, we’ll consider, with the Lord’s help, the answer to that question, in the doctrine of Sanctification.

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

## *Module 5 ~ Lecture 8*

### **The Doctrine of Sanctification**

Members of a family share many things in common. They have the same roots, or origins—they have the same family tree, if you will. They also have shared life experience together. But more specifically, we also identify members of the same family by their shared name, which distinguishes them from members of other families. Now all of those things you can see on paper. We can study a person's family tree, or see the differences between names, and so on. But there is something more that distinguishes a family—something you can actually see. Well, what is that? They have a shared physical resemblance. So when you look at them, you can see the family likeness. People will sometimes say, “You look like your mother,” or, “I can see your grandfather” in a particular facial expression. Sometimes it can even be seen from a distance, in a person's posture and gait—the way they walk.

Well, the impact of salvation carries a similar effect in God's people. Yes, they have the same spiritual lineage. Those who are in Christ are heirs with Christ, and come from the seed of Abraham. It doesn't matter whether you're Jew or Gentile, we have a shared history. And yes, each child of God is given a new name—they bear the name of God. These, and many other components, come with belonging to God's family or household. But there is more. God works through the gospel to re-create, in each of his children, the family likeness. He sends his Spirit to change believers, so that they look more and more like their elder brother, the Lord Jesus Christ. Well, this process of coming to share in the family likeness is called, Sanctification.

This series of lectures in this fifth module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the doctrine of Salvation. And the purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about how the Spirit applies the redemption of Christ to the individual soul of the believer. In this present lecture, we will consider the doctrine of Sanctification. And so, first of all, we'll begin by considering a passage of Scripture, to open up our consideration of the doctrine of Sanctification.

We read in 2 Corinthians 3, verse 18: “But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.” And notice a handful of things here. First of all, Paul speaks of an “open face,” in contrast to a veiled face, or a covered face. If you look at the preceding verses, he's talking about those who have a “vail” over their hearts, over their faces. So that refers to unbelief. Unbelief is like a veil that prevents sinners from seeing spiritually. Their minds are blinded, as verse 14 says. And by God's grace, the believer has that veil removed. They're enabled by God to see. God regenerates them and gives them faith to behold and understand what God has revealed.

Well, what exactly is it that the believer sees? The passage tells us they behold “the glory of the Lord.” So the glory of God, as it is seen in the face of the Lord Jesus Christ, as we look at all that is



to be learned about Christ in his incarnation, coming as Emanuel—God with us, in all of the works and teaching that he gives us in the gospel, but especially in the great acts of redemption—in his humiliation, and death upon the cross, and his burial, and his resurrection and ascension. In all of that, we see the glory of God. We learn things about who God is. In the next chapter, 2 Corinthians 4, verse 6, it says: “For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” So what they see is the glory of God.

And the next question is, Where do they see it? Well, the passage says, “beholding as in a glass”—or it could be translated, “beholding as in a mirror.” So they behold the glory of God in this mirror. The mirror is the Scriptures. Again, if you look at the preceding verses, it’s talking about the glory of the Old Testament, and the greater glory of the new covenant and New Testament era, and so on. So it’s this mirror of the Scriptures. Remember that Romans 10 tells us that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. So the believer beholds the glory of God, as it’s revealed in Scripture. It’s not apart from the Word, but through the Word that this change—which is going to be described—occurs. Jesus says, in John 17:17, “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.”

Well, what effect does this sight have? We’re told, they “are changed into the same image from glory to glory.” That is, they’re transformed into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ—that glory that they have been beholding. They are made more and more to look like him. And you’ll notice, this is a process—“from glory to glory.” From one degree to another, they’re being re-created, re-shaped, transformed into the likeness of Christ. That’s a description of what we call, in theological terms, Sanctification. So the effect of beholding the glory of God in the Scriptures is to be transformed into Christ’s likeness.

Lastly, you’ll note that this is not something that the believer does on their own. They can’t do it to themselves. Verse 5, of that chapter says, “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God.” Who is it that brings about this change? Well, look again at verse 18—God does. It says, “even as by the Spirit of the Lord.” So this is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works by, and with, and through the Word—the glass, the mirror—in order to sanctify his people. So the Spirit, who inspired the Scriptures, reveals Christ in those Scriptures, and in the process, he changes the believer into the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Well this introduces us to God’s work of Sanctification in the soul. We see a few threads here that are being woven together—some of the components of this doctrine. Well we need to further open up the details, and to clarify some important distinctions. So in the remainder of this lecture, we’ll explore what the Scriptures teach us about the place of Sanctification within the doctrines of Salvation.

And so that brings us, secondly, to considering a doctrinal exposition of Sanctification. So we turn, first of all, to the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 13, paragraph 1, which introduces us to what the Bible teaches about the nature of Sanctification. Paragraph 1 says this: “They who are effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ’s death and resurrection, by his word and Spirit dwelling in them: the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified, and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.” Well, that’s pretty long—it’s a long description, but it’s helpful because it gives us a number of the things that the Bible teaches.

The English word “sanctification,” or the verb “to sanctify,” comes from a root word related to holiness. And so it includes the idea of being set apart, or being consecrated, and it includes the idea of being made pure. So this is holiness. This is the work of being made holy, or Sanctification. It’s a work of God’s Spirit that takes place within the life of a believer, wherein they are dying more and more to sin, and growing more and more in Christian maturity, in Christ’s likeness, enabling them to perform good works, to God’s glory and by God’s grace. And so, you can think of it as growth in godliness, and growth in godliness is really growth in God-likeness. That’s what Sanctification is.

So let’s think about the theological context. So we take this doctrine of Sanctification—how does it fit within everything else that we’ve learned about the doctrines of Salvation? Well, first of all, think back to Union with Christ. This benefit, Sanctification, this benefit of Salvation comes through Union with Christ. Really, Romans, chapter 6 is focusing on this—the connection between Union with Christ and Sanctification. So in verse 6, it says, “Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.” And so, by virtue of being united to Christ by the Spirit, all that Christ is, and all that he has accomplished is applied to the believer. By Christ’s death, we die to sin. By Christ’s resurrection, and his resurrection power, we are brought to newness of life.

Think in terms of the connection to Predestination. God’s sovereign and gracious election included the purpose of ultimately re-creating believers into his own likeness. Romans 8, verse 29, “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son.” Predestinated to the end of being sanctified.

Think about it in relationship to Regeneration. Sanctification follows and flows from Regeneration. God, having created a new heart and spirit within his people, then transforms the believer into Christ’s likeness. You’ll see this in 1 Corinthians 6, verse 11. Therefore, the unbeliever is incapable of growth in godliness. He’s not born again; he’s not regenerated. They must first be born again. Any and all attempts at moral change in life are impossible without first being indwelt by the Spirit, because sanctification is a work of God’s Spirit. If you don’t have the Spirit, you can’t be sanctified.

You can also think of the relationship with Justification and Sanctification. Well Justification is a one-time, forensic act of God’s grace. Sanctification is an ongoing process in the life of the believer. You’ll notice an important difference in the definitions, in the Westminster Shorter Catechism. It says that “Justification is an act of God’s free grace; then you go to the next question, “Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace. So Justification is an act, Sanctification is a work, an ongoing thing. Justification is a legal change in the believer’s status before God, giving him acceptance and access before the Lord. Whereas Sanctification is a re-creative work within the inner life and character of the believer. It’s not just changing him legally, it’s actually changing who they are—the very person, their behavior, and so on.

We can also think of the relationship of Sanctification to Glorification. Glorification refers to the completion of redemption at the culmination of the last day. It is only then that the believer will be without all remnants of sin, in soul, and in the resurrected body for all of eternity. But Sanctification in this life remains incomplete. While there is growth, and development, and dying unto sin, sin is never completely eradicated. The believer contends with sin all life, all life long, in a perpetual warfare, having to confess sin, and repent of sin, and to strive after new obedience. You’ll see Paul describing this in Romans 7, in verse 14 and following.

Well, all of this helps clarify the theological context of Sanctification. But next, we should

think about the nature of Sanctification itself. And the first thing you'll note is it's absolute necessity—the necessity of Sanctification. Hebrews 12, verse 14 says, “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.” Holiness is indispensable to Salvation. True saving faith can never be fruitless, can never be a fruitless faith. Whenever God works, by the gospel, salvation in a soul, there'll be evidence of his work. There will be the fruit of it that's seen in the transformation of their character. Well that means, based on Hebrews 12, verse 14—no holiness equals no heaven. No one will go to heaven without having the evidence of holiness in their life.

We also need to note that this is, Sanctification is the supernatural work of the Spirit. We saw that in 2 Corinthians 3:18 at the beginning: “even as by the Spirit of the Lord.” The Lord's the One, the Spirit's the One who's bringing about this change. Man cannot sanctify himself. He cannot do this on his own. It's not as if you're justified, by the grace of God, and so on, and then you're left to kind of a legal labor, where you're on your own, in your own strength, trying to bring about this moral reformation. No, the Bible says quite the opposite. In 2 Corinthians 4, verse 7, we're told, “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” So it's the work of the Spirit that sanctifies the believer.

And it begins in the inner man. It begins there, and it works its way out through the whole life and behavior of the Christian. So they're transformed from inside out, if you will. It will affect the way they think, and feel, and speak, and the things they do, and so on. We can think of Sanctification as, there are two sides to the coin. On one side, there is what we call mortification, and on the other side, we have what's called vivification. So if you think of mortification—it's actually a word in the Bible. The word “mortify” means, to kill—to die. And so, it's speaking about sin—sin dying—Romans 8, verse 13: “For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.” You see the same thing in Galatians 5, verse 24, and Colossians 3, verse 5, and many other places. So mortification is referring to dying unto sin, seeing the Spirit killing sin in the believer. And as I said, it will result in a change in our behavior. It will result in a change in old habits. So, sinful thoughts, sinful words, sinful deeds that previously characterized the Christian, those things will slowly begin to decay—they'll be put to death. They'll begin to think more like Christ, and speak more graciously, and do what is in obedience to God's will, and so on. That's maturity—it's growing up in holiness.

The other side is vivification, and that comes from the word for “life.” So it's speaking about being renewed, or newness of life. Again, in Romans 6, verse 4, “That like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” You see the same thing in Colossians 2:12, and Colossians 3, verse 1 and following. So this is the work of not only dying unto sin, but living unto righteousness—living unto Christ's likeness. And it will be seen in the fruit of the Holy Spirit. In Galatians 5, Paul's drawing this contrast between the flesh, and the works of the flesh, and that fruit of the flesh, and the Spirit—the Holy Spirit, and the works of the Spirit, and the fruits of the Spirit, and so on. Well, as the Spirit is at work sanctifying the believer, there will be fruit that's born in them—the list of the fruit of the Spirit. We often refer to it, from Galatians 5. This is the work of vivification, of the Lord bring newness to life in the soul of the believer.

We should also think about the relationship of Sanctification to the means of grace. When we say “means of grace,” we're speaking about the instruments or vehicles that God has appointed, through which he communicates grace—namely, the Word, the sacraments, and prayer, as a means of grace. So this work of Sanctification takes place by the Word and the Spirit. So the Spirit's work-

ing through the Word—they work together. You don't have Sanctification with the Word without the Spirit, and you don't have the work of the Spirit separated from the Word. Remember, Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them by thy truth, thy word is truth." So there's a connection here. In 1 Peter 1, and verse 22: "Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren." And so, when we think of the gospel being preached to the unconverted, we know that the Lord uses the preaching of the Word, in order to bring about a saving change in the souls of men—they're converted. That can continue to be the case, in relationship to the believer. As they sit under the Word, God is using that Word to shape them and mold them, to press them into the mold of Christ's likeness, instructing them, and enabling them to walk in holiness. It's true of the written Word. It's also true of the visible Word in the sacraments. So you think, for example, of the Lord's Supper—the Lord's Supper is all about spiritual nourishment. The Lord is coming in the sacrament, Christ is coming by the Spirit, and strengthening the faith of God's people, enabling them to feed by faith on Christ, enabling them to grow in grace, to die unto sin, and live unto Christ's righteousness, and so on. So the Lord's Supper has an influence as well, in sanctifying the believer. And of course, we have prayer. We seek from the One who alone can give us this blessing. We are to cry out to him, and that exercise of the soul in prayer is a means by which we lay hold of the Lord in his promises, and they're applied to us. We fetch grace from heaven through this means that God's given. So there's a connection between Sanctification and the means of grace.

Thirdly, we need to consider this doctrine polemically, so we need to answer a few errors that sometimes arise in connection with this doctrine. First of all, there are those who speak about having Jesus as Savior, without having him as Lord. So, you can pray and ask the Lord to forgive your sins, and so on, and then continue to live as you've always lived, not having Christ as Lord of your life, exercising Lordship over you. Well, this notion needs to be utterly rejected as unbiblical.

First of all, it would be dividing Christ. You can't rip Jesus in two, and say, Well, I'll have him as Savior, and not have him as Lord—that's terrible. Furthermore, you can't divide Christ from his benefits. So you can't say, Well, I'll take the forgiveness of sins and the deliverance from hell—that's his benefits—without having Christ himself to reign over us. No, these things belong together. Those who come to him as a Savior come to him as Lord. You can't live as you've always lived. Where there's no fruit in a person's life, it's evidence that there's no saving faith in that person. There has to be a change that manifests itself.

Secondly, there are those who think of man, of the believer, as passive, as purely passive in sanctification. So you'll hear language like, "Let go, and let God." So, the way in which we're sanctified is to rest in the Lord, is to somehow get out of the way, and to get as passive as possible, so that the Lord can do his work. That's not what the Bible teaches. Man is active in Sanctification. You see the work of God and the work of the believer brought together in places like Philippians 2, verses 12 and 13: "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence"—listen—"work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." So there, he's saying the believer is to be active in pursuing something: "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." But it goes on: "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." So the believer is active in pursuing Sanctification, conscious of the fact that it is God himself, by the Spirit, who is working in the believer, through the appointed means, to bring about these things. So that's why this notion of man being passive flies in the face of all that we see in Scripture. Scripture describes the Christian life as a warfare. No one's passive on the battlefield. You have language of striving, and of wrestling, and of fighting, and of watching,

and of laboring, and so on. It's the language of the Christian life, and the work of Sanctification. And so, man is not passive.

We also need to recognize that there's no such thing as perfectionism. Some people will say, "Well, yes, in your sanctification, you can reach the point where you no longer sin. You reach a state of perfection." This is not what the Bible teaches. We're to be striving toward perfection, but we do not reach it in this life. That only happens at death, and ultimately on the last day. When the Bible says, "Be ye perfect"—like in the Sermon on the Mount—"be ye perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect," the language of "perfect" means "complete;" it means "mature." We're striving toward that absolute perfection, and it reflects a measure of growth and maturity. You say, "Well, Pastor, what about 1 John 3, verse 9?" because we read there, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin." Well, the answer to that is this—in the Greek language, it's actually more of, it's literally, "Whosoever is born of God does not continue to sin," or, "continue in sin." So that the tense of the verb is this idea of continuing on in sin. Yeah, those who are regenerated are not going to continue as they were before. They're not going to continue to be merely in the path of sin. And we know that's the case, because John can't contradict himself. Earlier, he said, in 1 John 1, verses 8 and 10: "If we say that we have no sin"—he's speaking to the believer—"we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." In verse 10: "If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." And so, the idea of reaching a state of sinless perfection in this world is not what the Bible teaches us.

Lastly, and briefly, we can now draw some practical application to ourselves about the importance of Sanctification in Christian experience. Remember the words of Jesus, in John 15, verse 4? "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me." This emphasizes dependence. The believer, in this work and process of Sanctification, is absolutely dependent on the Lord Jesus Christ, absolutely dependent on the ministry of the Holy Spirit. That means we need close communion with Christ—we need close communion with him. We need to be near him, and beholding him, beholding his glory, as in a glass. We need to be seeking to draw from his resources, drawing on the mediation of the Lord Jesus Christ; asking, seeing, and relying on the grace that is to be found in the Lord Jesus Christ. We walk in dependence.

But there's also hope. Philippians 1, verse 6 says, "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." So we can become discouraged. We are in this war with sin, and we see sin coming up, and there are some things that are slow to die in us, things that we continue to struggle with, and we can become discouraged in that. The Lord gives us hope here. He says, look, you can be confident. With the Lord, with the good work that he's begun, he will bring it to completion—he "will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." And we can take hope in that, that there is a day coming, not only in this world, where we continue to become more like Christ, but ultimately on the last day, when we will be without sin, and forever with the Lord.

And in that hope, we need to have reinforced diligence in the use of means. If the Spirit works through the means of grace, then we need to be super diligent about the use of those means. That's true privately, in our personal walk—Bible reading, and prayer, and meditation, and memorization of Scripture. It's true in terms of family—keeping up family worship, in the Word, singing God's Psalms, and so on, as well as the priority of public worship. The Lord has given to us the ordinance of preaching, as an important means for growing in grace. And so, we need to prioritize. It's the pivotal force in forming the piety of God's people—being in public worship, twice on the Lord's



Day, in the middle of the week, whatever it may be—the preaching of God’s Word, the reading of God’s Word, memorizing it, meditating upon it, the singing of Psalms, prayer, the sacraments—all of these, we need to really be diligent in using them, in dependence upon the Lord for growth in grace.

Lastly, what is the end of Salvation? The end of Salvation, as we’ve seen over and over, is God’s glory. “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” And God is most glorified when his glory is produced and seen in the life of believers. This is what Jesus says, in that passage in John 15, verse 8: “Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.” The end of Salvation is God’s glory. And the fruitfulness of this growth in grace and transformation into the likeness of Christ is the means God has appointed to gather glory to himself.

Well, in this lecture, we’ve considered an introduction to what the Bible teaches about Sanctification. We’ve noted that God causes his children to grow up into spiritual maturity, by the grace of his Spirit. That raises the question, How does this growth relate to the fruit of good works in the Christian life? Well, in the next lecture, we’ll consider, with the Lord’s help, the doctrine of Good Works.

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

## *Module 5 ~ Lecture 9*

### **The Doctrine of Good Works**

How do you distinguish between different types of fruit trees? Well, that's a pretty simple question. You look at the tree to see what kind of fruit is growing on the branches. Either bananas, or mangos, or papaya, or some other fruit. Well then, how can you guarantee that when you plant a fruit tree, you will be sure to eventually get the fruit you want—mangos, for example? Well, the answer is that you must be sure that you have the right kind of roots. You would not plant a small tree with papaya roots, and expect mangos to grow on it. The root determines the fruit. Jesus makes this point in Matthew 7, verses 16 to 20. He says, “Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit....Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.” Those with an evil heart of unbelief will bring forth evil fruit unto disobedience, whereas those with faith, rooted in Christ, will bring forth fruit by the Holy Spirit, unto holiness and good works. You cannot sever the connection between the root and the corresponding fruit. The works of men, whether good or evil, bear evidence to where they are rooted.

This series of lectures in this fifth module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the doctrine of Salvation. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about how the Spirit applies the redemption of Christ to the individual believer. Building on the previous lecture, which addressed Sanctification, we'll consider in this present lecture the doctrine of Good Works. And first of all, we'll begin by considering a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of Good Works.

We read, in Ephesians 2, verses 8 to 10, “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” Well, Paul explains where good works belong, and where they don't belong. He says that the believer is saved by grace. Grace is God giving to us what we don't deserve. It is not us giving to him. So he says, “faith;...is the gift of God.” You may recall from the previous lecture that faith receives what God provides in Christ. This is why he says salvation is “not of yourselves,” and “not of works.” We do not earn, pay, or merit salvation by bringing and contributing something to God in exchange for his saving mercies. The believer is justified by faith alone, receiving the imputed righteousness of Christ, and thereby granting us acceptance and access to God. Man has nothing in which he can boast. Since all comes from God, all glory must go to God alone.

Secondly, the believer is incapable of producing good works. We saw this in a previous module, that the natural man, in his sinful depravity, is dead, and blind, and ignorant. He has no ability

to do anything good. As Paul says, in Romans 3, verse 12: “There is none that doeth good, no, not one.” So this rules out the possibility of man earning salvation through good works.

But we also have to ask the question, does that mean there is no place at all for good works? Well, not at all. Paul goes on to say, in these words in Ephesians 2, that those who are saved by grace through faith are God’s workmanship. God does something with them, through them, and in them. Through his saving mercies, he brings alive those who were dead in sin—as you see in verse 1—and enables them, by this grace, to bear the fruit of Good Works.

Well, this could only take place by being in Christ, as Paul says—being brought into saving union with Jesus Christ. Those united to Christ are created in him unto good works. God’s design for them is to bear the fruit of good works for his glory. He not only enables them, he has before ordained that we should walk in good works. God’s plan of salvation, and more specifically the work of sanctification, includes this purpose—God’s purpose, to produce the good works of Christ’s likeness in his people. Good works, therefore, are an indispensable necessity in the Christian life. You can think of good works in terms of a mathematical formula. It is not faith plus good works equals salvation, but rather, it is faith equals salvation plus good works, or salvation accompanied by good works.

Well, this introduces us to the doctrine of Good Works. But we need to further open up the details and clarify some important distinctions. So, in the remainder of this lecture, we’ll explore what the Scriptures teach us about the place of Good Works within the doctrines of Salvation.

And that brings us, secondly, to considering a doctrinal exposition of Good Works. And there’ll be a half dozen or so points under this doctrinal exposition. First of all, we need to highlight the importance of Good Works in Sanctification. So you should note that the chapter on Good Works is one of the longest chapters in the whole Westminster Confession of Faith, demonstrating the importance of this doctrine. Paul himself reinforces the importance in Titus 3, both verse 8 and verse 14, where he says, “This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable unto men.” And then, in verse 14, he says, “And let ours also learn to maintain good works for necessary uses, that they be not unfruitful.” So we see it’s important.

Secondly, we need a definition. What do we mean by “good works”? The Westminster Confession, chapter 16, paragraph 1, helps us by saying, “Good works are only such as God hath commanded in his holy word, and not such as, without the warrant thereof, are devised by men out of blind zeal, or upon any pretense of good intention.” So we must limit the scope of good works to what God prescribes in the Bible alone. They’re not defined by what a person thinks is a godly idea, whether by adding or subtracting from the Word. You know, people can create their own rules of holiness. No, we’re limited to what God has commanded. Nor are men to base good works merely on good motives. So just because a person means well, does not qualify something as a good work, if it’s not derived from Scripture. Remember the words of Isaiah 8, verse 20: “To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.” These good works include both internal graces—things like love, and joy, and peace, and sorrow for sin—and external actions—practical obedience to God’s commands, and service to the Lord Jesus Christ. So that’s a definition—kind of the scope of good works.

Thirdly, we need to consider the relationship of faith and its fruit. Westminster Confession, chapter 16, paragraph 2, says, “These good works, done in obedience to God’s commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith.” So the fruits flow from saving faith in Christ. That means that without true faith, there can be no true good works. But it also means that wher-

ever there is a lively faith, there will be fruits that follow. In other words, if there is no fruit in a person's life, there is no faith. As we read in Hebrews 12, verse 14, "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord." Good works are necessary. Hebrews 12 is saying, "If there's no holiness, there will be no heaven." Why? Because if there is no fruit of holiness, there is no root of saving faith.

Fourthly, the ability to do good works comes from God himself. We saw in Ephesians 2 that the believer is "God's workmanship." Again, Westminster Confession, chapter 16, paragraph 3 says, "Their ability to do good works is not all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ." Remember Jesus saying, in John 15, verses 4 and 5, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing." So the believer is absolutely dependent upon Christ. All spiritual fruit, including good works, come from the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Remember Galatians 5, which lists some of the fruit of the Spirit—the Spirit is producing these fruits.

Well, does that mean that the believer is passive in the pursuit of good works? The answer is, no. The Bible does not teach that we are to "Let go, and let God." Rather, we are to engage in diligent pursuit of good works, in dependence upon the Lord. So faith draws on the resources in Christ for obedience and growth in grace. God provides promises, for example, in the Word, to direct and strengthen our faith in Christ. So faith lays hold on Christ in the promises, and in dependence upon his grace, pursues obedience.

So, for example, God promises, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness"—2 Corinthians 12:9. And he promises, "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it"—1 Corinthians 10, verse 13. Well, the Christian responds to these promises with absolute confidence, in faith. We can say, "Thy grace is sufficient. Thy strength is made perfect in weakness. Thou art faithful. Thou wilt enable me to escape temptation." And in the strength of the Lord, the believer resists temptation, depending on his grace, and confident that God will do as he promised.

Fifthly, even the believer's best good works fall short—far short of our duty to God. None of them can add to God's saving grace. Remember Jesus' words, in Luke 17, verse 10: "So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do." Even our best obedience is tainted with sin, and needs the blood of Christ to cleanse and purify.

Well, sixthly, does that mean the believer's good works are ultimately worthless, because they're tainted with sin? No, far from it. Why? Because there's a connection between their persons being accepted in Christ, and their good works being accepted in Christ. Westminster Confession, chapter 16, paragraph 6, says: "Notwithstanding, the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him; not as though they were in this life wholly unblamable and unreprouvable in God's sight, but that he, looking upon them in his Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections." So we see the fruit of faith in good works are truly good, through Christ, and in God's sight. God accepts and rewards what is sincere. It's sincere faith, despite the imperfections. Well, this is really amazing, because it means that grace is rewarded with grace. God enables his children to please him, and then he rewards them for it.

You'll notice that the New Testament has a great deal to say about heavenly rewards for God's

people. And the anticipation of reward is one of many proper motivations in pursuing obedience. In fact, the Bible teaches us the reward is commensurate with the work. So the more good works or fruit, the greater the reward. All men are not equal—both in hell and in heaven. There are various degrees of punishment in the damnation of hell—not everyone will be precisely equal. And likewise, in heaven, not all will be equal in terms of the reward that is received. Jonathan Edwards had a very graphic way of illustrating this. Jonathan Edwards was a godly minister from the 1700s. He said, “In heaven, picture every believer as a cup.” He says, “In heaven, every cup will be filled to the brim and overflowing.” Every believer will be filled with joy and blessing, and overflowing with it. “But,” he said, “there will be different sized cups.” He’s describing the differences in terms of rewards that correspond to the fruitfulness of God’s people.

Seventhly, the end, or goal, or aim of good works is glorifying God, which, of course, is man’s chief end. The more spiritual fruitfulness a believer has, the more glory is brought to God. In John 15, verse 8, Jesus says, “Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.” This is why God ordains for his people to walk in good works. He intends to gather great glory to his own name. When his people are made more and more Christ-like, they show forth more and more of Christ’s glory. Godliness, after all, is God-likeness. So he displays his glory in vessels of mercy, for his own praise.

Thirdly, we need to consider this doctrine polemically. We can fall into a ditch on two sides. The Westminster Assembly—the godly men who wrote the Westminster Confession—had to deal with two extremes. On one side, there was legalism—the idea that we’re saved by works in Justification (we’ve dealt with that in a previous lecture). But on the other side, the ditch on the other side was what was called antinomianism. And that error taught that there was no necessity of good works in Sanctification. So, as we’ve learned, the Bible rejects both of these errors. We must remain watchful against both of them. On the one hand, we have legalism—adding works to faith, or whatever else, to God’s grace. Adding works in Justification destroys the gospel. Rather than Salvation being God coming to us, and us being accepted by him, in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, man makes a contribution, and he, in part, takes credit for the salvation that he enjoys. This is terrible. This is against everything the Bible teaches. And so, that error of adding works to Justification is serious. But on the other side, we need to be careful about the idea of there being no necessity of good works in Sanctification. Because eliminating the fruit of faith and good works in Sanctification also destroys the gospel. Some insist that a person can accept Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and then continue to live in sin, however they please, with no thought of personal holiness. As we’ve seen, if there’s no fruit, there is no root of faith. And this would undermine the design of Christ’s saving work. Remember Romans 8, verse 29, “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son.” The purpose of God bringing the gospel is to take a hell-deserving, sinful, and polluted people, and to save and redeem them, in order that he might recreate them after the likeness of his own Son, thereby showing forth his glory. This undermines the gospel. So we need to be aware of these two ditches on either side, both of which are errors.

Fourthly, we can now draw some practical application to ourselves. And first of all, we can think about motivation—the motivation for pursuing good works in Sanctification. And one of the great motivations is love and gratitude for saving mercies. So the believer, who has done nothing, has earned nothing, but has received freely, by God’s grace, the salvation of their soul, they look upon all that God has undertaken, and upon Christ and his willingness to humble himself, and to offer himself as a sacrifice for sin, to stand as a substitute in the place of God’s elect people, and



to bear the wrath of God, and to satisfy divine justice, and all that Christ has accomplished. And the believer's heart swells with a sense of deep gratitude for all that the Lord has freely bestowed upon them. It intensifies love for the Lord. And it's that love and gratitude that are chief among the motivations that prompt us to desire to please him and to glorify him. We know that he's glorified through us bearing much fruit and bringing forth good works, and so the believer is in earnest about that. We depend upon the Lord to enable us to glorify him in pursuing these good works. The Sum of Saving Knowledge which was a document often printed with the Westminster Confession of Faith, says this: "The obedience to the law must flow from love, and love from a pure heart, and a pure heart from a good conscience, and a good conscience from sincere faith. This, he makes the only right channel of good works." Jesus says, If you love me, you'll keep my commandments.

Secondly, we could think about some of the benefits of good works, very briefly. One thing that good works do is that they strengthen the believer's assurance. They see the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit in their soul, and bringing about fruitfulness, and the good works are being born, it's one component—not the only, but one component—that further strengthens and deepens their assurance that they are in a state of grace. Assurance that they have true saving faith, and are therefore persuaded of God's love toward them, and of their salvation.

Another benefit is that good works adorn the believer's profession of faith. So they beautify, they show forth the handiwork of God in their life and in their soul. Another thing, another benefit, is that it edifies others, so other people, other believers are built up and strengthened in their own faith, and in their own pursuits of holiness, through our good works, and our service to Christ and to them, and the life example of holiness, and so on.

Furthermore, it has the benefit of being a witness to unbelievers. Jesus says this, "They will see your good works and glorify our Father which is in heaven." And so it's a testimony to the grace of God to those who are unbelieving, which accompanies the preaching of the gospel. And as we noted, the greatest benefit of all, in terms of good works, is that it glorifies God.

Thirdly, we need to make a thorough use of the promises, to exercise faith in dependence upon Christ. What I mean is, as you are reading through the Bible, you should ransack all of the promises that God's given, and by faith, to lay hold of those promises, to believe them, to trust and put the weight of your soul upon them, and thereby to quicken your faith, to then go forward in the Lord's strength, in dependence upon him, to seek his glory. So for example, you're reading in the prophets, and you come to Hosea, and you come to the last chapter, in chapter 14, verse 5, God promises: "I will be as the dew unto Israel: he shall grow as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon." Well, faith puts the weight of our soul on the certainty of God's promise, saying, "Lord, thou wilt be as dew to me. I'm confident in that." He's going to water us and refresh us, and strengthen us. "And thou art the one who will make me to grow in fruitfulness." And then trusting the Lord that he will do as he promised, we venture out in dependence upon him, to walk in holiness, and in gospel fruitfulness, in the production of good works, to his glory. And so, we need to exercising our souls in the work of Sanctification, and asking the Lord to bring about the fruit of good works.

Well, in conclusion, in this lecture, we've considered an introduction to what the Bible teaches about good works. We've noticed that while good works are excluded from Justification, they serve as the necessary fruit of faith in Sanctification. God glorifies himself through the abundant fruit of his Spirit produced in the lives of his people. But does God's work of grace in the believer continue over the whole span of the believer's life? Well, in the next lecture, we will consider that question, with the Lord's help, in addressing the doctrine of Perseverance.

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

## *Module 5 ~ Lecture 10*

### **The Doctrine of Perseverance of the Saints**

The Apostle Paul compares the believer to a runner, and the Christian life to a race, in a few different places in his epistles. Well, this is a helpful illustration. But what kind of race does the believer run? We know, for example, that a person can run both short distance sprints, and long-distance marathons. A sprint requires short bursts of energy and power, but the physical exertion is over quickly. By contrast, a marathon involves sustained endurance over a long duration. The runner must continue to press forward mile after mile after mile, on various terrain, up and down steep hills and across flat stretches, until at long last, he crosses the finish line.

Well, it should be fairly obvious that the Christian life is more like a marathon than it is a sprint. It's spread over a believer's whole life in Christ, with all the ups and downs that that involves. In other words, it involves perseverance to the end. When Paul reached the end of his own life, he wrote in 2 Timothy, chapter 4, verses 7 and 8, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course"—or race—"I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing." Believers are called to persevere in faith, and they are promised that they will be preserved until the end of their life.

This series of lectures in this fifth module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the doctrine of Salvation. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about how the Spirit applies the redemption of Christ to the individual soul of the believer. So in this present lecture, we will consider the doctrine of Perseverance. And first of all, we'll begin by considering a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of Perseverance.

We read, in John, chapter 10, verses 27 to 28, the Lord Jesus saying these words, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand." In this passage, we learn that God preserves all of his elect in the state of grace and salvation, keeping them by his power, and enabling them to persevere to the end. We see that the believer's perseverance is secured in God's divine election, in Christ's definitive atonement for their sins, and Christ's ongoing power as their Shepherd. Notice, first of all, that in the Gospel of John, chapter 10, Jesus reveals himself as the Good Shepherd. Well, the image of a shepherd was a familiar picture of God in the Old Testament. For example, we sing, in Psalm 23, verse 1, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," which then goes on to describe how he leads his people into green pastures and beside still waters. Well, this theme of God, as the shepherd of his people can be traced through the whole Old Testament.

Secondly, in verse 27, we learn that Christ's sheep hear his voice. So they are given spiritual ears that discern the voice of the true shepherd, and they respond by attentively following him.

Well, we see this when God's elect people sit under the gospel. They recognize, and embrace, and believe the good news of salvation. Those who are saved, flee to Christ, obey Christ, and follow Christ, wherever he leads them in the teaching of his Word.

Thirdly, furthermore, we are told that Jesus knows his sheep, and he says that he gives his sheep eternal life. Well, how does he do this? Well, earlier, in verse 15, we read Jesus saying, "and I lay down my life for the sheep," and this refers to him offering himself as a substitutionary sacrifice, and atoning for the sins of his elect people. So the Good Shepherd provides a full salvation for all of his sheep.

Fourthly, that eternal salvation, that eternal life is unalterable—it's permanent; it's secure. Verse 28 says, "And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand." In other words, what Christ does cannot be undone. His sheep will never perish. They are unable to ever perish. Well, why? Because no one can pluck Christ's sheep out of his hand. In the next verse, he confirms this by saying that no one can pluck them out of the Father's hand, and that he and the Father are one. Christ keeps his people with divine power. Nothing and no one can match or overthrow God's power. So the eternal salvation of God's people and their safekeeping is guaranteed and preserved by God himself. They will therefore persevere to the end.

And this introduces us to the doctrine of Perseverance. But we need to further open up the details and clarify important distinctions. So in the remainder of this lecture, we'll explore what the Scriptures teach about the place of Perseverance within the doctrines of Salvation. And so, secondly, the second main heading of our address or lecture, we will consider a doctrinal exposition of Perseverance.

Notice several things. First of all, the perseverance of the saints refers to the fact that those who are truly saved and in a state of grace, will continue in that state to the end of life, and will inherit eternal life in the glory to come. This is certain because of the power of God, who will bring to completion all that he has begun in them. So if you look at Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 17, paragraph 1, it says, "They whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved."

Secondly, having defined Perseverance, we need to understand that Perseverance is rooted in the very nature of Salvation. So again, if you read in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 17, paragraph 2, it says, "This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ; the abiding of the Spirit, and the seed of God within them; and the nature of the covenant of grace: from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof." So notice what Perseverance depends upon. Perseverance does not depend on the power of men, or on the free will of men. It is rooted in the unchangeable election of God.

Now we've considered the doctrine of Election in a previous course within Systematic Theology. God's decrees cannot be frustrated or altered. The Lord's love for his people cannot be broken. At the end of Romans 8, in verses 38 and 39, we read, "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." So those whom God chose to save, in his love, will certainly be saved in the end. Election provides for all of redemption, from our effectual calling, all the way through to our

glorification. Those who are elect will inescapably persevere in faith. So Perseverance depends, first of all, upon the immutability of God's election. It also depends upon the believer's union with Christ. Those who are in Christ, who are savingly united to Christ, by the Spirit, through faith, cannot be severed from him. Christ joins them to himself, and keeps them by his power. Philippians 1, verse 6, says, "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ."

Thirdly, Christ's death, and the accomplishment of Christ's redemptive work, secures Perseverance. He died to save the elect, and he cannot fail in his purpose to do so. Those, for whom he died, will be saved. John 6, verse 39, says, "And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day."

Fourthly, this is reinforced by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes to indwell the believer. We saw this in the lecture on Regeneration—this work where God comes and indwells his people, gives them a new heart, plants the principle of grace in them, and so on. Well, the Holy Spirit is a permanent gift, and a seal and earnest of the believer's inheritance. Ephesians 1, verses 13 and 14, says, "In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory." So the presence and ministry of the Spirit guaranteed perseverance.

Next, we see that it's also reinforced by Christ's High Priestly intercession. Christ's work continues in heaven, where, as the High Priest, we're told that he makes continual intercession for his people. Jesus is constantly praying for his people. Those prayers have power. They have efficacy. Christ's prayers must be heard and accomplished. They can't fail. And so you read at the end of Hebrews 2, and at the end of Hebrews 4, Christ, as a sympathetic and passionate High Priest, he is interceding for his people, and that this secures their spiritual stability. He, by his prayers, is keeping them. Those prayers can't fail. Second Timothy 1, verse 12, says, "For I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he"—he—"is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day."

Next, we see that Salvation includes the final completion and consummation of the believer's redemption. So "to be saved" includes the fact that they'll be brought to glory—God's people. Second Timothy 4, verse 18, "And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." Or, you think of 1 Peter, chapter 1, verses 4 and 5, where Paul speaks about us being given "an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved"—it's kept—"in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God"—"who are kept by the power of God unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." So the Lord has purchased an inheritance for his people, that can't be lost, and therefore, they'll be kept by his power unto that final salvation. So all of these, all these Biblical truths demand the necessity and inescapability of Perseverance, rooted in the power and purpose of God himself.

Well, thirdly, under this doctrinal exposition, all of this grounds Perseverance in God's work of grace. The question is, what about the place of the believer's responsibility then—the believer's responsibility to persevere in the Christian life? Well, if you look again at the Westminster Confession, chapter 17, and this time, paragraph 3, it says, "Nevertheless, they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and for a time continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve his Holy Spirit; come to be deprived of some

measure of their graces and comforts; have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.”

Now this reminds us that Perseverance, includes both God’s sovereignty, which we’ve been considering earlier, and the believer’s responsibility. God both preserves the elect, and the elect must persevere in faith. The former—God’s election is the foundation of the latter—the believer’s perseverance. But the former—God’s preservation cannot be separated from the latter—man’s perseverance. So what it does is, it accentuates the fact that the believer lives in dependence, depending upon the Lord Jesus Christ. So the believer has to be walking near to Christ, cultivating fellowship with Christ, resisting sin, fighting the devil, walking in the pursuit of holiness, all while drawing, by faith on the infinite resources of Christ, depending upon him for grace to continue to walk with the Lord. That means we have to watch; we have to be vigilant; we have to continue to seek the Lord’s face in prayer and be saturated in his Word. We’re not able to say, Well, God preserves the elect, therefore we don’t have to worry about anything. He truly preserves the elect, but that’s an incentive and an encouragement for us to continue on the path that God has laid out for us.

Well, another question, fourthly, is this: How do we make sense of those who were professing Christians, and who forsook the faith, and for some of them, ultimately perished in their sins? Perhaps you’ve known people like this. They appear to be vibrant Christians, then something happens, and they leave the Christian faith, they forsake and reject Christ, they deny the gospel, and some of them die in that state. How do we make sense of that? You think of Judas, who was one of the twelve disciples, or Demas, who was a colleague of the Apostle Paul, who forsook him, having loved this present world.

Well, the answer is in recognizing the difference between a person’s profession of faith, and the actual possession of personal faith. Not all who profess faith actually have personal faith. Remember the parable of the seeds. There are some who spring up quickly, with great joy, and all looks well at first, but they don’t have the root of the matter. Troubles come and they wither and perish. Others spring up, and the cares of this life and the deceitfulness of riches choke them out. They didn’t have the root of the matter. Then there’s the seed that falls on good ground and bears good fruit. So we need to recognize that the apostacy of the non-elect, who are nevertheless professing Christians, is a reality.

So that’s why we have these warnings in Scripture. A graphic one is in Hebrews, chapter 6, verses 4 to 6, where the Lord warns about those who have all the outward indicators of being in Christ, and yet who don’t, and who perish. He goes on, if you keep reading past verse 6, and it says, However, we expect “better things of you, and things that accompany salvation.” So those, in verses 4 to 6, had the look of being saved outwardly, but weren’t truly saved—didn’t have true faith in Christ, weren’t united to Christ.

And so, there’s a reality that there will be those who apostacize from the Christian faith, and leave the visible church. And we shouldn’t have our faith shaken by that, or be astonished. We know that the Lord has warned us of these things. That’s not a denial of Perseverance. It’s a display of the fact that all of those who claim to be Christians aren’t truly Christians. Those who are truly saved, will truly persevere unto the end.

Well, thirdly, we need to consider this doctrine polemically. We’ll note a few things here. First of all, there is what we call Historic Arminianism—a system of doctrine opposed to the Reformed faith, which is Biblical and reflected in all of our lectures. So, historically, the Arminians have said that the believer can fall away—can fall away, finally, and ultimately from the state of grace and be eternally lost. And the reason is because they believe wrongfully that everything depends upon the



exercise of man's free will. That's true in terms of their coming to Christ initially in their conversion, and it's true in terms of their continuing in the faith. Ultimately, man must fulfill Perseverance prior to his decisive justification and election. Well, this distorts the whole doctrine of Salvation, by introducing a works element as a condition of redemption. Salvation ultimately depends not upon what God does and what Christ has secured; it ultimately depends upon what man does and secures for himself. And based on all the other lectures that we've seen prior to this, we have to reject that as against what the Bible says, including this matter of Perseverance. We've noted many passages of Scripture with reference to that, in Jesus' teaching and in Paul's teaching.

Secondly, there's a problem that's arisen within modern evangelicalism. So some have taken the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints, and they've replaced it with the doctrine of Eternal Security. They speak about "once saved, always saved"—those who were once saved, are always saved. Well, there's nothing wrong with that language: eternal security—that's good language. It is true that once a person is saved, they will be always saved. So it's not the language that's the problem. The problem is what lies behind it in some of the modern forms. There is this notion of "easy believe-ism," which is affected again by modern Arminianism. And it has at least three problems. The first is that the word "saved"—once saved, always saved—is defined by a human act of decision, rooted in the free will of men. So, consequently, if a person has made a decision and profession to follow Christ, then they're automatically guaranteed security in their eternal estate, regardless of what that means, or whether or not there are fruits of faith, and so on. And it affects things like Assurance, which we'll consider in the next lecture. Assurance becomes something secured by a one-time act, rather than attained and strengthened by the work of the Holy Spirit introducing fruit within the believer. So they think in terms of, well, you respond to an altar call, you say a prayer, you sign a card—a pledge, you do these other things, and now you have, if you will, a hellfire insurance policy that no one can take away from you, no matter what a person does with the rest of their life. And so there's this idea, "Well, I've said a prayer, and so now I can live how I want, and it doesn't matter; I'm free from hell." That's not what the Bible teaches. It ignores, for example, the Biblical reality of apostasy, by those who are professing Christians. So that's a problem.

Thirdly, there are the Lutherans, and the Lutherans attempt to maintain Perseverance apart from the basis of Election, which we've seen from Scripture in an earlier part of this lecture. They contend that believers can lapse into sin, and lose faith, and grace, and the Holy Spirit, and totally fall away. There can be a sincere lapse into unbelief, but the elect will ultimately persevere. But it's not actually rooted in election. So rather than having a continuous perseverance, there is a discontinuous, but eventual perseverance. So election is in part secured through the believer's perseverance, rather than the reverse.

Lastly, we have Roman Catholicism, and it repudiates Perseverance altogether. It asserts that a wholesale defection from God can take place in the believer, and that this can only be recovered through penance, and the other sacraments. So they have no place for, really, the grace of God in preserving his people in a state of grace.

Well lastly, and fourthly, we can now draw some practical applications to ourselves. First of all, the believer's confidence is placed in God's power, in God's love, in God's grace, not in themselves. As Paul says, our sufficiency is not of ourselves, as "to think anything is of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God"—he writes that to the Corinthians. Or you think of Jesus' words, in John 15, "Without me, ye can do nothing." And so, the believer has their confidence in the Lord, and in his power and grace. And with that confidence, and dependence upon him, the believer faces the

responsibility to walk with and before the Lord, in his grace, by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Well, that secures for us a place for keeping our eyes watchful, because backsliding is a threat that genuine Christians must face, as we saw in Westminster Confession 17:3. We need to study both the cause and the cure of various forms of spiritual declension. We are responsible and culpable for our spiritual carelessness, and our spiritual drifting—our backsliding. We must stand on guard against that to address that. The goal of the Christian life is finishing well, not just beginning well. The crown goes to the overcomer who ends the race with triumph, not to those who just begin the race with great zeal and promise—we saw that earlier. Some evangelicals put an emphasis on the start of the Christian life, but are always talking and thinking about what was done in the past, whereas the Bible and the Reformed faith also puts an emphasis on the duration of the Christian life, and on the pursuit of holiness until death. And so, the question is not just where we were at one point in the past in our life, but where are we right now? Are we, by God's grace, through his power, and the ministry of the Spirit, persevering in faith and in grace? Our ardent pursuit of holiness and Christ's likeness is tangibly carried out by our love for God and our pursuit of God's glory. We are constantly nurturing communion with Christ; constantly being at war with sin; constantly pursuing his glory—day to day, hour after hour, year after year.

Well, perseverance is attained by God keeping his people in his own hand, so the believer recognizes that everything regarding their salvation comes from God and his grace. All of the glory, therefore, goes to God alone, and not to us. So the believer perseveres by keeping their eyes fixed on the author and finisher of their faith, the Lord Jesus Christ—the One who has secured their redemption.

Well, in conclusion, in this lecture we've considered an introduction to what the Bible teaches about Perseverance. We've noted that Perseverance is indispensable to God's work of Salvation in the soul. Those chosen by God, purchased by Christ, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, will, by God's grace, persevere in faith until the end, and inherit eternal life. Well, here's another question: Can a person be confident that they are actually in a state of grace, and therefore will persevere? Well, in our last lecture, we'll consider that question, with the Lord's help, in addressing the doctrine of Assurance.

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

## *Module 5 ~ Lecture 11*

# **The Doctrine of Assurance of Grace and Salvation**

Think of a newborn child born into a loving, godly home. That infant has so many blessings of which he is not aware. He has life, though he's not conscious even of the concept of life. His parents provide everything he needs—food to nourish him, clothing to warm him, shelter to protect him, and so on. Above all these things, he has a father who dearly loves him, who delights in him, and cherishes him. But will the father be satisfied with this? The answer is, No. He not only loves his child, but he wants his child to come know, and be blessed by the love of his father, and to see and enjoy the tokens of that love in all the provisions made for him. It delights the father to see his love registering in his son's conscious persuasion of his love. Well, this illustrates for us the doctrine of Assurance of Grace and Salvation. Can a person be confident that they have true saving faith, and that they are actually in a state of grace and salvation. If so, how do they come to this persuasion? Well, we'll be addressing these questions in this lecture.

This series of lectures in this fifth module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the Doctrine of Salvation. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about how the Spirit applies the redemption of Christ to the individual soul of the believer. In this last lecture of this fifth module, we'll be considering together the Doctrine of Assurance.

And so, first of all, we will begin by considering a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of this doctrine. We read, in 1 John 5, and verse 13: "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God." Now in this verse, John tells us his primary purpose for writing this first epistle. He does something similar in the Gospel. If you'll remember, in the Gospel of John, chapter 20, verse 31, he says, "But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name." Well, here, in 1 John 5, verse 13, we discover that his aim remains the same. The purpose of his epistle is that souls might believe on the name of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. He longs to see people coming to faith in Christ, and putting all their trust in Christ's person and saving work. But that is not all. He desires that if a person is a believer, they might know that they have eternal life. So he not only desires for them to be united to Christ by faith, and in a state of grace, he aims at them being brought to know, and to be persuaded in their own hearts that they are saved from their sins; that they are no longer dead in trespasses and sins, but rather, that God has brought them into newness of life in Christ, and that they have confidence in their eternal life in heaven to come.

Well, that means two things, doesn't it? First of all, it is possible for all believers to attain assur-

ance of faith in salvation. Secondly, some believers need assurance, but do not have it. We also see a connection between faith and assurance. Assurance is the fruit that grows out of the root of faith. Only those with true saving faith can and should have sound assurance. The focus is first on coming to faith in Christ. There are those who are tempted to bypass the necessity of faith, and proceed to granting themselves peace, concluding that they're saved when they're not. That's a problem. John therefore writes under the inspiration of the Spirit with the purpose of coming alongside souls to assist them in this matter of faith and assurance. Really, the whole book of 1 John relates, among other things, to the issue of assurance. John points to Christ as the object of faith, and he provides clear marks, or evidences, of the fruit of faith, exposing those without grounds for confidence, and confirming those with Biblical grounds. In doing so, he aims to help true believers in coming to assurance of their salvation. You should go back and read through the epistle of 1 John in this light.

Well, this introduces us to the doctrine of Assurance, but as with the other lectures, we need to further open up the details and clarify some important distinctions. So in the remainder of this lecture, we will explore what the Scriptures teach about the place of Assurance within the doctrines of Salvation. So secondly, we'll consider a doctrinal exposition of Assurance.

First of all, Assurance refers to the personal persuasion and confidence that a true believer has that they are in the state of grace, and an heir of salvation. This definition, at least in its simplicity, is important, because you can see that this in no way refers to the basis for a person's salvation, which is entirely outside himself, but to the personal conviction and certainty that the believer has been personally saved through the gospel.

So in the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 18, paragraph 1, we read: "Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favour of God and estate of salvation; which hope of theirs shall perish: yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavouring to walk in all good conscience before him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in a state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God; which hope shall never make them ashamed." Well you see the Westminster Confession distinguishes between those who deceive themselves with a false assurance, and those who have true saving faith, and come to be certainly assured that they are in a state of grace. Well, to clarify that concept, I think it may be helpful for me to spell out four categories of people. To clarify, think of four categories of people.

First category—there are those who are saved, and know that they are saved. So they have assurance. Secondly, there are those who are saved, and don't know that they are saved. They don't have assurance. They are not persuaded or confident in terms of their being in a state of grace. Third category are those who are unsaved, but wrongly believe they are saved. They have a false assurance. And then the fourth category is those who are unsaved and know they are unsaved, and of course, they have no assurance. So those are the four categories of people. The two categories needing the most attention, in terms of our lecture, are the second and third. Those who are saved, and yet don't have assurance, they don't know that they're saved; or those that are unsaved, and think wrongly that they are saved.

So to begin with that third category, the reality of that third category, that there are people that are unsaved but think they are, creates a concern, doesn't it? And Jesus warns us of it. In Matthew 7, verses 21 to 23—the end of the Sermon on the Mount—Jesus says, "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And

then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.” So we see here that there can be those who perhaps are near the kingdom, but not in the kingdom. We’ll discuss this further in a moment.

Going back to that second category, those who are saved but don’t know it, who aren’t assured of it, this is also a reality of Christian experience. Like the child in our introduction, such a person needs to come to a settled persuasion of their condition through the means that we’ll be discussing. Second Peter, chapter 1, verse 10: “Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall.” Every believer is exhorted to make attaining assurance his personal pursuit. This is done by making our calling and election sure, not by someone else telling us that we are saved.

Secondly under this point, Westminster Confession, 18, paragraph 2, says this: “This certainty:—assurance—“this certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion, grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith, founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God: which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.”

Well, this brings us to the heart of the matter. The Bible teaches, as you can see in the Westminster Confession, that true assurance of faith is founded on three things. Like a three-legged stool, you need all three components for the stool to stand up, or for a person to have assurance. When I speak of the grounds of assurance, I mean the way in which we come to obtain assurance, not the basis, of course, on which salvation rests. So let’s think of the three legs of the stool that makes up assurance.

The first one is objective, so it is outside of ourself. Namely, it is the promises of salvation. So the first component of assurance are the promises of salvation. Really, the primary means of gaining assurance is by looking at God’s faithfulness in Christ, in the gospel. The promises are windows through which we look to the Promiser. And so Biblical assurance is always Christ centered. We are to lay hold of Christ in his promises. And you think of how this comes out in the record of Holy Scripture. The Lord says—we’re told, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.” Jesus says, “Come unto me, all ye who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” The Lord says, “All who come to me, I will be no means cast out.” The Lord says, “Let us reason together; though your sins be as scarlet, they’ll be white as snow; though they be like crimson, they shall be as wool.” And we can go on and on. Here are gospel promises that the Lord has given, that we are to lay hold of before the Lord.

And though our feelings are in constant flux, God’s promises are unchangeable. They’re sure. “His truth endures.” “Let God be true, though all men be liars.” And so we begin by focusing on the Lord, as he shows us himself in the promises that he’s given. So a person comes to the Bible, and the Bible says, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.” And then they say, I truly do believe on the Lord Jesus Christ; therefore, I am saved. So we’re deriving a measure of confidence from the promise that God has given to us. If we come to him, he will be no means cast us out. It’s impossible for him to cast us out. I am coming to him, and therefore, it’s impossible for him to cast us out. So are we believing, are we coming, are we clinging to Christ alone for salvation. The promise conveys hope, encouragement, confidence.

The second component, the second leg of the stool is subjective. So it’s something found within us, namely, the witness of the Spirit of adoption. So this is based on, for example, Romans 8, verses 15 to 17: “For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received



the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ.” So this refers to the mysterious working of the Spirit in the hearts of his people: the Spirit bearing witness with our spirits that we are the children of God; the Spirit assuring the believer that they are saved, they are sons and daughters of the living God. The Holy Spirit works through the Word to confirm is love in the hearts of his believing people.

The third component is what we would call demonstrative. So this refers to the evidences and fruit of grace within the life of the believer. So the Spirit and the Word cannot be separated. The Spirit without the Word leads to mysticism; the Word without the Spirit leads to rationalism. So when we speak about evidences, this refers to the fruitful evidences of saving faith. We are assured that Christ is in us, because we see him being exhibited through the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. When you see the fruit of the Spirit, you recognize this is humanly impossible. These are not things that the natural man can do themselves. We observe things inside us. So sorrow for sin; there’s a love for Christ; there’s faith in God’s Word; all of the fruit of the Spirit that are listed in Galatians 5.

All of these sorts of things help persuade the believer that the root of the matter is in us, that we have true faith, because we see the fruit of faith, and because that fruit is humanly impossible. It includes things that describe outside of us as well; for example, obedience—1 John 2, verses 3 to 6: “And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his Word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.” And so that language, which is used in the Gospel of John 14, verse 15, and elsewhere within 1 John, that shows us that knowing and loving God, being in the state of grace is demonstrated by obedience to his commandments.

So this fruit is tangible; it’s observable evidence of our saving faith. As James 2, verse 26, says, “Faith without works is dead.” So the evidences of sanctification actually strengthen a person’s assurance. And conversely, disobedience can weaken our assurance. This is why self-examination is indispensable. In 2 Corinthians 13, verse 5, we’re told, “Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobrates?” So self-examination is indispensable to assurance. You have to examine yourself, with the help of the Spirit, under the light of the Word, to know whether we have the marks or evidences of saving faith and grace in our souls.

Now, we need all three of these. If we focus merely on one, things get distorted. We need to focus on the promises, and laying hold of those, those promises encouraging us. We need to know about the witness of the Spirit. We need to also examine the fruit of faith in our life.

Fourthly, assurance is not of the essence of faith. So in other words, the very core, or nature of faith does not bring with it automatically, assurance. Westminster Confession, 18, paragraph 3: “This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties, before he be partaker of it: yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto. And therefore it is the duty of every one to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure; that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance: so far is it from inclining men to looseness.”

Now why is this important? It’s important pastorally and practically in dealing with tender

lambs. Because it means that a person who does not have assurance does not mean that they don't have faith. No assurance does not mean no faith. And this is important in helping struggling souls. There's a distinction between assurance and the direct act of faith. As I said earlier that assurance is part of what flows from faith, not faith itself. Faith is the root. So the direct act of faith is trust in Christ for salvation, whereas assurance is the persuasion that this salvation is ours. Confusing the two makes the act of faith the belief that we are heirs of glory, rather than trusting Christ, in order that they might be the heirs of glory. Do you see the point? The point is, if we say that assurance is the essence of faith, that the act of faith is, "Well, I'm confident that I'm a Christian, I'm in a state of grace." That puts the emphasis in the wrong place; rather than faith in Christ, that's faith that somehow we're in a state of grace. Well that's the wrong object, in terms of the act of faith. So we need to recognize that assurance is not of the essence of faith, and that there can be believers who are struggling with assurance, but nevertheless have true saving faith, and that helps us in helping them.

In fact, we can speak further to this, because, fifthly, a true believer's struggle with assurance is something that is real. Again, Westminster Confession, 18, paragraph 4: "True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it; by falling into some special sin, which woundeth the conscience, and grieveth the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation; by God's withdrawing the light of his countenance, and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness, and to have no light; yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may in due time be revived, and by the which, in the mean time, they are supported from utter despair."

So the believer can have struggles with assurance, not only in coming to assurance, but after having attained assurance, some battles. And it comes from all of the things the Confession says. It could be sin in our own life, temptations; it could be all sorts of other things that arise that kind of unsettle us. But we are to seek the means—use the means that God's given, and to seek that settled persuasion of the Lord's love for us. Second Corinthians 1, verse 12: "For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward." Well, we must hasten on.

Thirdly, we need to consider this doctrine polemically, and the first area that we should be aware of is modern evangelical tendencies, what some have called "easy-believism." The idea that teaches that instantaneous assurance must be granted to all that profess faith in Jesus Christ. So you'll have, in Arminian evangelism, someone comes and walks an aisle, and they say the "sinners prayer" or sign a card or something else, and they're told that they're given instant assurance that they are saved. Well, the problem with this is several things. It assumes that someone else is able to give another person assurance, and that's wrong. We can't speak peace to a man before God speaks peace to him. It also subverts the sovereign work of the Spirit in bringing an individual to apprehending their peace with God, in His time and way. It denies that sometimes coming to assurance is a steady, progressive work in the life of the new believer. It does not provide for the waxing and waning of assurance that even occurs in strong believers from time to time. And it has inoculated some to the true gospel, granting them infallible assurance, when they are not, perhaps, truly converted—so assuring a person that they're saved, when perhaps they are not yet saved. That's a damage to their soul. So that's a problem. We need to beware of this tendency.

The second area or the second group would be Rome—Roman Catholicism. Roman Catholicism says that personal assurance is impossible apart from some special revelation, which is exceedingly rare. So assurance is also seen as undesirable, because the absence of assurance keeps people constantly seeking to better themselves through their good works, and using the Roman Catholic sacraments, and giving money to the church, and so on. Well in all that, grace is lost. Grace is lost through every sin, and only regained through their penance. Thus, there is a never-ending question as to whether one will enter eternal rest. So Rome rejects the doctrine of Assurance entirely.

Even within Protestantism, we have those who kind of are on the other end of the spectrum from evangelical easy-believism. And that is the view that assurance is not normal, it's not normative for the believer, and that those who do attain it in this life, only do so after a grueling, lifelong struggle. This is often characterized by a focus on self, rather than on the Lord Jesus Christ. And this view can stem from placing all of the emphasis for assurance on the inspection of an individual's heart, through self-examination, without giving a proper place to God's promises. So things become out of balance. It also does not account for the enormous New Testament emphasis on the blessing of assurance. It can, in fact, stem from a distorted view of God, which portrays him as a Father who does not want his children to know that he loves them. And as a result, it ends up magnifying unbelief, rather than strengthening faith. The focus is placed exclusively on coming to Christ, over against those who have come, walking with Christ in love. And this can rob the believer of making progress in sanctification, by removing the real object of redemption, and the fuel to attain it.

Fourthly, we can now draw some practical applications for ourselves. First of all, assurance is one of the great privileges of being a Christian. It should be sought by every believer. You know, what wonderful thing, when God causes his love to be shed abroad in the hearts of God's people by the Holy Ghost; to know and revel in the love of God; to recognize that you have a gracious, loving, heavenly Father. Really, what kind of Father would withhold from his children, or desire to withhold, an assurance of his deep and abiding love for them? Yes, the Father has to chasten them, but even there, he desires for his love to be manifest. The believer's heavenly Father has purposed for his children to richly enjoy the assurance of his great love for them in the gospel. And this assurance produces intense spiritual joy.

It also stimulates abiding peace in a very turbulent world, a "peace that passes all understanding," as Philippians 4, verse 7 says. And it strengthens us in resisting the temptations of sin. This is like the child who knows his father's love and delights in seeking to please him. So it increases the believer's love for our heavenly Father. And, as a result, assurance quickens our service to God. The apprehension that we are loved by God, and belong to his family, motivates our labor in serving him for the advance of his kingdom. And that strengthening of our service to God actually brightens our witness to the Lord. Right, the assured Christian can be a true light to a dark and unbelieving world. The believer is able to say, "Come and see what the Lord has done for my soul," and it brightens their witness.

Think of the words of Paul, in Romans 8, verse 39: "For I am persuaded"—there's confidence here; there's persuasion, assurance—"I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Paul states that assurance is founded on seeing the entire corpus of redemption for God's people. He looks back to election, he looks forward to glorification, as indicators of God's inseparable love

for his children.

Well, in this lecture, we've considered an introduction to what the Bible teaches about assurance. We've noted that assurance is an important part of God's work of salvation. This assurance, the persuasion and confidence that we're in a state of grace and salvation, and have true saving faith, is something to be sought and attained from the Lord. It produces confident joy in the Lord and glorifies his sovereign grace.

Well, this lecture concludes our module on the doctrines of Salvation. In our next module, or course, on Systematic Theology, we will consider a series of lectures on what the Bible teaches concerning the Doctrine of the Church.