

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by beginning to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. Dr. Spencer, how would you like to begin?

Dr. Spencer: Well, last week we talked about the fact that Jesus Christ had to bear our sins on the cross and die for us to be saved. But this whole issue of our fundamental *need* for salvation is so important, and so central to what is wrong with many churches today, that I want to spend a bit more time on making a solid case for it. Our greatest need, and the fundamental mission of the church, have nothing to do with this life. They have to do with what happens *after* we die.

Marc Roby: When you look at what goes on in many churches and what is often said about Christianity in the world, you wouldn't get that impression.

Dr. Spencer: No, you wouldn't. And that is the problem. In Luke 12:4-5 we read that Jesus said, "I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him."¹

Marc Roby: Well, that certainly makes it clear that this life is not the most important thing. We are not to fear those who can do no *more* than kill the body, even though we tend to think of that as being pretty much the worst thing possible.

Dr. Spencer: And when we think that way, we demonstrate that we don't fully believe there is an eternal heaven and hell. We need to adjust our thinking to be biblical. And you could also extend this idea very easily, it isn't just a matter of whether I live or die that is not eternally important. For example, a thousand years from now it really won't matter whether I spend the next ten years enjoying health, peace and prosperity or if I endure horrible pain, conflict and poverty. What will matter is whether I am then in heaven or hell. Life is short, and eternity never ends. We should plan for eternity. Most of us take time to plan our vacations, but how often do we sit down and consider our eternal destiny?

Marc Roby: Not as often or as seriously as we should I'm afraid.

Dr. Spencer: People often put off any such thoughts until they are forced on them, and even then, they often resist. When the doctor says you have terminal cancer and only have three months to live, you would think anyone would get serious about considering what happens after death. But often people simply keep themselves busy making plans for their estate or take pride in facing the inevitable with a stiff upper lip, or just descend into a pit of self-focused despair.

Marc Roby: Yes, I've witnessed all of those reactions, and others.

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Dr. Spencer: And my point is simply that it is all too easy and natural to be completely absorbed with this life. But such a view leads to a religion that is focused on making this life better.

I quoted from J. Gresham Machen's book *Christianity & Liberalism* last week and I want to quote from it again. He wrote that "Joy is indeed being sought by the modern liberal Church. But it is being sought in ways that are false. How may communion with God be made joyful? Obviously, we are told, by emphasizing the comforting attributes of God – His long-suffering, His love."²

Marc Roby: Or, as one modern liberal theologian put it, we should focus on God's "one-way" love. The idea being that God loves me even if I don't love him and he has a plan to make my life wonderful.

Dr. Spencer: Which means, among other things, that you shouldn't feel guilty for sin or think about eternal punishment. You should just focus on God's love. But Machen points out that "Two questions arise with regard to this method of making religion joyful – in the first place, Does it work? And in the second place, Is it true?" He goes on to answer these two questions. He wrote, "It certainly ought to work. How can anyone be unhappy when the ruler of the universe is declared to be the loving Father of all men who will never permanently inflict pain upon His children?" But then he points out the obvious fault with the view, "If God will necessarily forgive, no matter what we do, why trouble ourselves about Him at all? Such a God may deliver us from the fear of hell. But His heaven, if He has any, is full of sin."³

Marc Roby: Well, given that sin is the cause of all our misery, a heaven full of sin doesn't sound like much of a heaven to me.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. But that is the heaven liberal theology holds out for us. They don't say that of course, but that is the logical conclusion of their theology. If I don't need to have my sin removed, if I'm just fine the way I am, then heaven won't be perfect. To be sure, they would say that there won't be any physical sickness or death in heaven, but what about all the personal problems and pain caused by our sin? I'm sure that almost every one of these people thinks that someone like Hitler will either be changed or won't be there, but it is the height of arrogance and lack of honest self-evaluation for anyone to think that he can go to heaven as he is and have it still be a place of perfect peace and rest. Or even to think that he only needs some minor improvements to belong there.

Marc Roby: I agree. But Machen mentioned two questions; the first was whether or not this liberal theology works, and we've just explained why it doesn't. His second question was more fundamental, he asked whether or not this theology is true. How did he answer that?

Dr. Spencer: Well, he wrote that "The other objection to the modern encouraging idea of God is that it is not true. How do you know that God is all love and kindness? Surely not through nature,

² J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity & Liberalism*, New Edition, William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2009, pg. 112

³ Ibid

for it is full of horrors. Human suffering may be unpleasant, but it is real, and God must have something to do with it. Just as surely [you do] not [know that God is all love and kindness] through the Bible. For it was from the Bible that the old theologians derived that conception of God which you would reject as gloomy. ‘The Lord thy God,’ the Bible says, ‘is a consuming fire.’”⁴

Marc Roby: Well, if I may summarize and paraphrase a bit, Machen is saying that the idea of a God who is all love and kindness is not consistent with the facts of life in this world, nor does it agree with the God revealed to us in the Bible.

Dr. Spencer: That’s a fair summary. God *is* love, but as we pointed out last time, you have to define love biblically and you have to account for the fact that God is also just, holy and so on. The God of liberal churches is a figment of people’s imaginations. He is a Santa Claus for grownups. When we were little children, we were able to believe in Santa Claus, but then we grew up and realized he doesn’t really exist. The liberal god is just a far more sophisticated benevolent figure. One whom we know can’t be seen. But this god of human imagination is false. He doesn’t exist. And he can’t help anyone.

Marc Roby: And yet you see studies that claim all sorts of advantages for people who consider themselves to be religious or spiritual, independent of whether that religion is true biblical Christianity. One paper from the Mayo Clinic, for example, says that “Most studies have shown that religious involvement and spirituality are associated with better health outcomes, including greater longevity, coping skills, and health-related quality of life (even during terminal illness) and less anxiety, depression, and suicide.”⁵ How do you explain results like that?

Dr. Spencer: Well, first of all, you can also find reputable studies pointing to the tangible benefits obtained from meditation.⁶ I don’t doubt that these findings have an element of truth. It seems reasonable to believe that by taking time out of your day to do anything that takes your mind off of your immediate problems and let’s your body relax is probably good for your health. It’s also good for your health to eat a balanced diet and get daily exercise. But these things will not save you. They may help you live longer and healthier, but they will be of no use to you once you die.

So, I don’t doubt that liberal churches can provide some benefits *in this life*. The whole point I’m getting at however is that this life is not the most important thing. There is a never-ending eternity that comes next. Even if I live to be 110 years old, what difference will the quality of my life make 1,000 or 10,000 years from now?

Marc Roby: Well, it is logically clear that it won’t matter much at all. But that is hard for us to see here and now. But what you have said reminds me of the final verse from that great hymn,

⁴ Ibid, pp 112-113

⁵ P.S. Mueller et. al., “Religious Involvement, Spirituality, and Medicine: Implications for Clinical Practice”, Mayo Clin Proc, December 2001, Vol 76, pp 1225-1235 (available from: [https://www.mayoclinicproceedings.org/article/S0025-6196\(11\)62799-7/pdf](https://www.mayoclinicproceedings.org/article/S0025-6196(11)62799-7/pdf))

⁶ For example, see <https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/12-benefits-of-meditation#section1>

Amazing Grace; we sing, “When we’ve been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when we’ve first begun.”

Dr. Spencer: That is a great hymn, and that line is literally true. Eternity never ends. So 10,000 years is nothing. We cannot conceive of that, which is part of why it is so easy to be deceived and focused entirely on this life.

Marc Roby: Now, to be clear, you’re not suggesting that this life is not important at all.

Dr. Spencer: No, quite the contrary in fact. This life has eternal importance. Once you die, the decision is made about your eternal destiny. The Bible is clear that there aren’t any second chances. If you reject God’s only way of salvation now, you will never get another chance. And the Bible also hints at the fact that there are different levels of reward in heaven and different levels of punishment in hell, so how we live matters. But the most important issue, by leaps and bounds, is a binary decision. Everyone will either go to heaven or to hell. And the least horrible place in hell is unimaginably terrible, while the least wonderful place in heaven is indescribably glorious.

Marc Roby: And heaven and hell are both eternal.

Dr. Spencer: They are. And so the important point I’m laboring to make is the singular importance of salvation. Religion in the broad sense, or even that incredibly nebulous thing called spirituality, may provide some benefits in this life, just like meditation, proper diet and exercise can. But the only thing that can bring you eternal salvation is the gospel of grace revealed to us in the Bible.

Jesus himself said in John 14:6, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Every human being alive, or who has ever lived or ever will live, will be judged based on their answer to the simple question Jesus posed to his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” And there are only two answers. Either Jesus is who he claimed to be – God incarnate, the only mediator between God and man, the Savior and Lord of the universe, or he was just a man, and a liar at that.

Marc Roby: And, if he was just a man, we may want to emulate him in some ways, but he is of no help with regard to our eternal destiny.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. But he isn’t just a man. He is the Lord of the universe and we owe him absolute, unquestioning obedience, worship and love.

Marc Roby: And the Bible is the only place we learn what God has said concerning our salvation.

Dr. Spencer: And the first thing that God tells us is that we are sinners. Malachi was the last prophet of the Old Testament and in Malachi 3:1 we read that the Lord God, Jehovah, said, “See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come”.

Marc Roby: And we learn in the New Testament that this messenger who prepares the way for the Lord was John the Baptist.

Dr. Spencer: And what was the message John the Baptist preached?

Marc Roby: Well, we read his message in Matthew 3:1-2; “In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’”

Dr. Spencer: And in Mark 1:15 we read that Jesus himself said, “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” The good news is the gospel. It is the biblical message of salvation. That Jesus Christ came and died in my place to pay the penalty for my sins. And if I will give up all self-reliance, if I will recognize the truth that I am a sinner in need of a Savior, and if I will acknowledge Jesus Christ as that promised Savior, I will be saved. True repentance and faith in Christ are like two sides of a coin, you can’t have one without the other.

Marc Roby: And no one will repent if he doesn’t see that his sin is terrible.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. The problem with false churches is that they don’t tell their people that God demands repentance and holy living. The prophet Jeremiah prophesied while God was bringing judgment on his people in Jerusalem, but he was opposed by many other so-called prophets who said the judgment would not come.

But the judgment did come, the city was destroyed and the people were taken captive to Babylon. In Lamentations 2:14 Jeremiah wrote that “The visions of your prophets were false and worthless; they did not expose your sin to ward off your captivity. The oracles they gave you were false and misleading.”

Marc Roby: So exposing sin can be a very good thing, it can ward off captivity, or eternal hell.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. It is like a diagnostic test that reveals your cancer. You aren’t going to be cured if you don’t even know you have the disease.

So, calling yourself a minister of the gospel and calling your building a church while failing to tell people they are sinners in need of a Savior is a serious sin. The most important responsibility of a true church is to proclaim the gospel. Not to try and make people feel good about themselves. And the good news of the gospel must follow the bad news that we are sinners, and that God is justly angry with sin. We need a Savior. Only when we confess our need can the cure of the gospel be applied.

Marc Roby: And that cure must address our real need, that is to have our sins atoned for.

Dr. Spencer: If the church doesn’t address that issue, it has reduced itself to nothing more than a self-help program and social club. You might as well go to the gym and work out or go and meditate. The only thing that can save us is the true gospel of Jesus Christ. To preach anything else is a terrible sin and leads people to hell.

Marc Roby: And even though liberal churches usually reject the idea that a Christian must be obedient, the somewhat paradoxical truth is that they are preaching salvation by works. Because

they deny the miraculous work of Jesus Christ on the cross and focus on just being good people, most of their members, if asked why God should allow them into heaven, would say something like, “Well, I try to keep the Golden Rule and live a good life. I give to the poor regularly” and so on.

Dr. Spencer: And that attitude *is* salvation by works, even though they are not the works that God primarily requires of us. Paul addressed this issue in his letter to the Galatians. In this case there were other preachers who had come in after Paul had presented them with the true gospel, and those preachers were telling the people that they needed to be circumcised and follow Jewish traditions to be saved. They were adding to the pure gospel of grace and turning it into salvation by works. Paul wrote, in Galatians 1:8-9, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!”

Marc Roby: And, of course, to be eternally condemned means to go to hell.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. I can’t imagine a more terrible proclamation. Preaching a false gospel, whether of works or any other kind of error, is a serious sin. We must be very careful to present the clear, true, biblical gospel of salvation. It is man’s greatest need, in fact, in a very real sense it is his *only* need.

Marc Roby: And I look forward to getting into the true biblical doctrine of salvation next time, but this looks like a good place to end today, so let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org, we will do our best to answer.