

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. More specifically, we are discussing the *ordo salutis*, or order of salvation. And we are using the order presented by John Murray in his excellent book, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*. He gives the following order: effectual calling, regeneration, repentance and faith, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, and finally, glorification.<sup>1</sup> In our session last week we finished regeneration, so, Dr. Spencer, I think we are ready to begin examining repentance and faith.

Dr. Spencer: We are indeed. And what a glorious topic that is. As we have discussed, when a person is born again, or regenerated, by the Holy Spirit, he or she is made into a new creation. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"<sup>2</sup> And the first thing this new creation does is to repent and believe. And that is something that we must personally do. It is our response to God's monergistic work of regeneration.

In fact, it would be impossible for a born-again person to *not* repent. The man who has been regenerated sees clearly, although not yet completely, just how vile and terrible his own sin is. He is now aware of how he has offended God and the only possible response is to fall at God's feet and cry out for mercy. Just as a man who is dying of thirst must drink, so a man who has been born again must seek God's forgiveness. It grieves him that he has offended God, his guilt gnaws at his soul and his longing for God, who he now sees as supremely good, draws him forward.

Marc Roby: One of the most beautiful expressions of this attitude in the Bible is Psalm 51. In that psalm, King David cries out to God in repentance after God used the prophet Nathan to convict him of his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and then his having her husband Uriah the Hittite killed in order to cover it up.

Dr. Spencer: That is a wonderful psalm. It not only displays great sorrow for having offended God, it also demonstrates a great hope that God will be merciful in response to true repentance.

Let me read the first 8 verses. David cries out, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me

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<sup>1</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 87

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wisdom in the inmost place. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.”

Marc Roby: You get a great sense of the pain that David felt when he was brought to the place of seeing his sin clearly. And he understood that although he had sinned greatly against Bathsheba, her husband Uriah and even the people of his kingdom, his real problem was that he had sinned against God. And he had nothing he could plead in his defense; all he could do was to cry out for God’s mercy.

Dr. Spencer: I agree it is a wonderful psalm and I encourage our listeners to read it over carefully and apply it to their own lives. David also clearly understood that God is the only one who could take care of his sin problem. And he knew that the basis for any relief would have to be in the unflinching love and mercy of God, not in something David himself could do.

There are also a couple of much shorter, but no less poignant, expressions of true repentance given to us in the New Testament as well.

Marc Roby: What are those?

Dr. Spencer: Well, one of them is the thief on the cross. Remember that two thieves were crucified with Jesus. And initially, they both mocked him, but then God mercifully caused one of them to be born again. That thief was immediately made able to see the truth and we read in Luke 23:40-41 that he rebuked the other thief for continuing to mock Jesus. He said, “Don’t you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

Marc Roby: That is a simple but profound confession, he saw that he deserved punishment and that Jesus did not.

Dr. Spencer: And he then went on, as we read in Luke 23:42 to cry out, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He clearly saw that Jesus has an eternal kingdom that transcends this life and by faith he entrusted himself to Christ. We don’t know exactly how much this man knew about Jesus’ teaching, but he obviously knew enough.

Marc Roby: And he received what must be one of the most wonderful comforts ever given to any human being. We read in Luke 23:43 that Christ told him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Dr. Spencer: That is amazing. And that thief has been in glory for nearly 2,000 years. But there is an even shorter confession in the New Testament, which I’d like to take a little time to examine. In Luke 18 we are told the wonderful parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Marc Roby: Let me read that parable. In Luke 18:9-14 we read, “To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and

said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Dr. Spencer: There is a lot of rich teaching in that parable, but notice how succinct the tax collector’s confession is. He simply said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” The brevity of this confession in no way argues against the value of confessing our sins to God in detail, this man was obviously not in a position to be making a long confession. But his confession makes it clear that what is essential is a heart that has been changed. It has been changed so that it sees God in his holy majesty and it sees how our sins, even the smallest of them, are wicked rebellion against this most glorious and gracious God.

Marc Roby: We also see the tax collector’s reverence for God in the facts that he stood at a distance and wouldn’t even look up to heaven. He obviously understood that he was unworthy to come into God’s presence.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that’s very true and very important. In fact, as Luke indicated, Jesus told this parable to some “who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else”. We must always guard against thinking that we are somehow worthy of salvation. The truth is that what we *are* worthy of is damnation. Salvation is a free gift offered by grace alone. If anyone thinks that he is worthy of going to heaven, then he is not saved and he is on his way to hell. God’s standard is absolutely perfect holiness, and no one outside of the God-man Jesus Christ meets that standard.

Marc Roby: Jesus himself told us in Matthew 5:48, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Dr. Spencer: That is the reality. God is perfect. He will not bring sinners to heaven to dwell with him forever without perfecting them first. And we all need serious change, as Paul wrote in Romans 3:23, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”. There is no hope for any of us if we try to stand before the judgment seat of Christ on our own merits. Our sins must be atoned for. The tax collector saw this problem clearly. He saw that God is perfect in his holiness and justice and he realized that he was a rebellious sinner. That’s why he wouldn’t come close and he wouldn’t lift up his eyes to heaven.

Marc Roby: That makes me think of the very first line of John Calvin’s *Institutes*, Calvin wrote that “Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Spencer: That is very true. The tax collector had been born again and as a new creation he saw clearly the Creator/creature distinction. He knew he had a problem that he couldn’t possibly solve himself. James Boice in his book *The Parables of Jesus* points out that the beginning and

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<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Henry Beveridge, Hendrickson Publishers, 2008, 1.1.1 (pg. 4)

ending of this simple prayer reveal the tax collector's understanding of his problem.<sup>4</sup> The prayer begins simply by saying, "God", and it ends with "me, a sinner." There could not be a greater contrast than that.

He stood before God, albeit at a distance and with his head bowed in shame, as a guilty sinner deserving God's wrath and unable to pay the debt himself. But he knew much more than that. In our English translation the prayer reads, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." But in the Greek, the word translated here as "have mercy" is *ἰλάσκομαι* (*hilaskomai*), which means to propitiate.<sup>5</sup> And, as John Murray explains, "Propitiation presupposes the wrath and displeasure of God, and the purpose of propitiation is the removal of this displeasure."<sup>6</sup>

**Marc Roby: It's also interesting that *hilaskomai* is the verb form of the Greek word used for the mercy seat, or atonement cover, in the Septuagint, which was the Greek translation of the Old Testament in use at the time of Christ. The mercy seat was called the *ἱλαστήριον* (*hilastērion*) in the Septuagint.**

Dr. Spencer: Boice makes that point also, and even offers an interesting translation of the tax collector's prayer. He correctly says that it could be rendered, albeit quite awkwardly, as "God, be mercy-seated toward me, a sinner."<sup>7</sup> Now Christ had not yet died, so the tax collector still had in mind the Jewish sacrificial system, in which the high priest would go into the holy of holies once a year, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, and sprinkle blood on the mercy seat. But the New Testament makes clear, particularly in Hebrews 9, that the entire Old Testament sacrificial system was pointing toward Christ. He alone is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" as John the Baptist declared in John 1:29.

And so, the tax collector's prayer, while very short, was also very profound. He had a deep understanding of his problem and of the solution that God offers. And he came to God in true repentance for his sins and faith in the solution God offers in the gospel. And that is why Jesus said he went home "justified before God."

**Marc Roby: We will be talking about justification soon since it is the next item in the *ordo salutis*, but for now we should probably note that it is a legal declaration wherein God declares a sinner to be righteous in his sight.**

Dr. Spencer: And we should add that the declaration is made on the basis of our being united to Christ by faith. As you said, it is a legal declaration. God is not saying that we are righteous in ourselves, that would be a lie. But, because we are united to Christ by faith, his righteousness is counted as ours. He took our sins upon himself and paid for them on the cross and, in return, he

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<sup>4</sup> James Boice, *The Parables of Jesus*, Moody Press, 1983, pp 83-91

<sup>5</sup> E.g., see *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Thomas Nelson, 1996, pg. 404, or Walter Bauer, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd Ed., Revised and augmented by F.W. Gingrich and F. Danker, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979, pg. 375

<sup>6</sup> Murray, *op. cit.*, pg. 30

<sup>7</sup> Boice, *op. cit.*, pg. 90

gives us his perfect righteousness. This is the double transaction, or double imputation that we have mentioned a number of times and which Paul wrote about in 2 Corinthians 5:21, where we read that “God made him who had no sin” which, of course, refers to Jesus Christ, “to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

**Marc Roby: And that is the glory of the gospel in one verse. It doesn't get any better than that. We give God the filth of our sins and he gives us the perfect righteousness of Christ.**

Dr. Spencer: It certainly is the best deal anyone could ever possibly imagine getting. But we are getting off topic a bit since we are considering conversion, or repentance and faith, today.

**Marc Roby: Well, it's not really off topic since we are united to Christ by faith.**

Dr. Spencer: That's true. But let's get back to finishing what it truly means to repent. The tax collector had true repentance, but there can also be a repentance of sorts that does not lead to salvation.

**Marc Roby: I assume you are referring to what Paul calls worldly sorrow in 2 Corinthians 7:10, where we read, “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.”**

Dr. Spencer: That's exactly what I'm referring to. Often, when people say they repent of something they have done, or more likely they just say that they are sorry for something, all they really mean is that they are sorry for the circumstances it has produced. When we sin, we pay in some way. It isn't always immediate, nor are the consequences in this life always proportional to the sin, but we do pay.

So, for example, if we look at a young man who has been lazy all through school and as a result ends up working in some menial job for minimum wage, he may say that he is sorry for not having applied himself in school, but what he really means is that he is unhappy about the fact that he can't get a job with higher pay. In other words, he is sorry for the *consequences* of his sin, not the sin itself.

**Marc Roby: And that kind of worldly sorrow is very common. But that is a far cry from the biblical idea of repentance.**

Dr. Spencer: It is very different. True repentance would require that the young man see that his laziness was a sin against God. That God gave him the ability and the opportunity to learn and that he was being rebellious against his Creator by not applying himself. He would not just feel bad because the consequences of his sin are unpleasant, he would feel deep sorrow at having offended God and, more importantly, he would forsake his laziness and start working hard to improve himself!

**Marc Roby: That's a very important aspect of true repentance. We can't go back and undo the past, but we can certainly work hard to not repeat the same sins in the future. In speaking about the new life a truly repentant person will live, Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:28, “He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.”**

Dr. Spencer: That does illustrate the difference made by regeneration very clearly. There is a false teaching in the world that is quite common in churches and individuals that call themselves Christian. It is the idea that Jesus can be your Savior without being your Lord. In other words, you don't have to repent and forsake your sins, you just have to acknowledge Jesus as Savior.

Now, we must agree that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone. No one will ever be saved *because* he repented and forsook his sins. Our repentance is not the cause of our salvation, nor is our faith a cause of our salvation. They are the *response* of someone who has been born again. And you cannot have true faith without true repentance. They are inextricably linked together.

**Marc Roby: And why is that?**

Dr. Spencer: Because true conversion is the result of regeneration, which causes us to see that our own best works are like filthy rags in God's sight. It causes us to realize that we can do nothing to save ourselves and that we have offended the holy God. We see our own sin as odious and we see Christ as glorious and wonderful and we naturally turn away from our sin with great disgust and turn to Christ in joyful, loving faith. We cannot turn to Christ and lay hold of him as Savior without simultaneously letting go of our sin and turning from it. It is an impossibility. In 1 John 3:9 we read, "No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God."

**Marc Roby: I look forward to your completing that biblical case to support the contention that repentance and faith are linked together, but we don't have much time left for today, so this is a good place to stop. I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org) and we will do our best to answer you.**