**What is Salvation?**

**Text: Romans 8:1**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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In the spring of 1952, the Boston Red Sox had a phenomenal rookie named Jimmy Piersall. He could play both shortstop and outfield, he could hit for both power and percentage…and he was driven by a fear of failure. His father was harsh and demanding, quick-tempered and hard to please. Perhaps it was his desire to please his father, and his fear that he wouldn’t, drove Piersall to both baseball excellence, and mental breakdown. His movie biography, *Fear Strikes Out*, depicts him hitting a home run at Fenway Park with his father in the stands, and after rounding the bases he climbs the screen behind home plate and screams at his dad, “*Is that good enough for you, is that good enough?!*”

I wonder sometimes if many of us have a similar fear of failing to please our *Heavenly* Father. Most of us are not nearly so gripped and driven and overwhelmed by that fear, of course, but on some level I think it’s there. On some level we recognize just how firmly our lives are gripped by sin. On some level we realize, with St. Paul, that we can *will* what is right, but we cannot *do* it. And so, despite our best intentions, we are *always* letting down our Heavenly Father. That’s just part of the reality of being human.

But here’s the thing: we are *way* more worried about that than God is. Hear the good news: “There is…*no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). Paul has just gotten through lamenting how much control sin has over his life, what a *wretched* man he is, and yet he boldly proclaims, “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death” (Rom. 8:1-2). No condemnation; no punishment; no angry God sitting up there in heaven just *waiting* for us to mess up so that he can lower the boom on us.

Too many of us, I fear, carry around that picture of an angry God in our heads and hearts. Too many of us, even in our 60’s and 70’s and 80’s, have childhood memories of an angry parent, punishing us for being disobedient, and we project those memories on God. And so we think of salvation as pleasing God; we think of salvation as being just *barely* good enough in what we think, say and do that God will smile on us and forgive us for all those times when we’ve blown it.

But that’s not salvation. Not even close. Salvation has *nothing* to do with *our* actions and *everything* to do with *God’s* action. Salvation has to do with God reaching out to us – in all of our fear, in all of our sinfulness – God reaching out to us, and holding us and comforting us and accepting us.

There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Because God has come to us in Christ Jesus; God has crossed that chasm of sin that separates us from God and from each other, and God in Christ has gathered us all up in a tender embrace.

This is all God’s doing. And it’s a free gift. Salvation is not a reward for strong faith. Salvation is not a reward for good works. Salvation is a gift. We are saved by grace alone! Salvation is not even a response to our faith. It’s not like I hear the good news of God’s love, I respond with faith, and then God responds with salvation. *No!* That’s not how it works. God reached out to us even *before* we believed. Faith itself is a gift from God.

God reached out to us even before we were *born*. God reached out to us and *all* humanity even before the foundation of the world was laid! Check out the first chapter of Ephesians: God “chose us in Christ *before the foundation of the world* to be holy and blameless before him in love. He *destined* us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he *freely bestowed* upon us” (Eph. 1:4-6). Another translation says “that he *lavished* upon us.” In other words, you were saved *long* before you were born. We were all saved even before the first day of Creation. In the timeless wonder of eternity, God chose us to be alive in Christ forevermore. *God* chose us. God *chose* us. God chose *us*! There’s nothing that you had to do about it; there’s nothing that you *could* do about it, because it was all taken care of a long time ago. When you made the Good Confession and accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, you were just waking up to a reality that already existed. Your salvation – our salvation – has already been taken care of.

It’s kind of like, when you’re travelling and your reservations get all messed-up, but a hotel clerk at the front desk straightens it all out for you and she says, “It’s all been taken care of, Mr. Ervin.” And you just let out a big sigh of relief. Someone has taken care of it, and it’s such a relief.

That’s the way that God works. It’s all been taken care of. There is no condemnation, there is no threat of God’s righteous judgment, we no longer live under the threat of God’s punishment, because God in Christ has taken care of everything; everything.

Let me illustrate it this way, and bear with me, folks, ‘cause this story really is going somewhere, but it might take a while:

It’s the first game of the 1954 World Series. The Cleveland Indians are playing the New York Giants at the Polo Grounds. The score is tied 2-2, but the Indians are threatening. With 2 men on base, one of their heavy hitters comes to the plate: Vic Wertz. Giants manager Leo Durocher goes to the mound to make a pitching change. He brings in Don Liddle just to face Wertz. The batter works the count to 2 balls and a strike. Then Liddle winds –up, and Wertz hits a *prodigious* blast. That ball is going so far and so fast in the deepest outfield in the major leagues that the only question is: will it be a triple or an inside-the-park home run? But patrolling the cavernous confines of center field is a 23 year old phenomenon named Willie Mays. At the crack of the bat he’s on the run. At a full sprint 460 feet from home plate, he catches the ball over his shoulder, stops, pivots, fires the ball back to the infield, it reaches the 2nd baseman on the fly, Wertz is out, no one scores, and it remains a tie ball game.

Meanwhile, Don Liddle – who was put in the game just to face Wertz – makes his way back to the dugout. And he says to his team mates, “Well, I got *my* man!”

It had nothing to do with him! And your salvation has nothing to do with you. God has taken care of it all *for* you. If sin is thinking that it’s all about me, salvation is realizing that it has *nothing* to do with me; and *everything* to do with God.

Salvation – yours and mine and the salvation of the whole world – it’s all been taken care of. Because God so loves the world that God has embraced the whole world in Jesus Christ.

But…that doesn’t mean that you can just sit back and feel all good about yourself. As we *receive* our salvation, as we receive the good news of God’s acceptance and forgiveness, we relax into God’s unconditional love and we let go of our fear and anxiety.

But that same grace which forgives our sin and frees us from the fear of punishment also *empowers us* to do the good works that sin prevented us from doing. The grace of salvation both forgives us and empowers us. Grace both forgives our sin and empowers us to fulfill the requirement of the law: to do justly, and love mercy, and walk humbly with God. Thus, as Paul says, God in Christ has condemned sin “so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us” (Rom 8:4). *We* are not condemned, but *sin* is. And thus we are *freed* from sin to do the work of salvation in the world. “Work out your own salvation in fear and trembling,” Paul says, “for God is at work in you” (Philippians 2:12). Salvation has been accomplished, once for all, in Jesus Christ (Romans 6:10); but we are called to *reveal* the goodness of God’s salvation by doing good works in the world, as God gives us the grace to do so; as God *empowers* us to do so; as we are *able* to do so; because God’s Spirit is at work within us. We do this in Christian community, according to the gifts which God has given to each of us and to all of us. We are differently gifted, but together the Spirit empowers us to do the righteous work of God’s Kingdom; and thus the Spirit reveals to the world *through* us the justice and mercy and compassion of God’s salvation.

From time to time we *relax* into God’s grace, so that we can be refreshed to do the *work* of God’s grace. We all have work to do, and we all have been given gifts to do that work. The trick is to match up the work that must be done with the gifts that we’ve been given. Because when you’re doing work that you’re *gifted* to do – when you’re doing something that you’re *passionate* about – that work becomes not so much a burden as a delight.

I bet that you never thought of working in the kitchen or cutting grass at Camp as being part of the work of salvation. But it is. A. Dale Fiers, our first General Minister and President, recalled his days when he was the Executive Secretary of the United Christian Missionary Society and he loved working on budgets because he knew that every figure in that budget helped to keep missionaries in the field; missionaries who spread the good news of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ. *All* that we do in the life of the Church is part of sharing with the world that good news.

The work of salvation has been completed in eternity, but the struggle continues here in time. Sin doesn’t realize that it’s been condemned. For a while our sinful nature continues to run around, like a chicken with its head cut-off. Martin Luther said that we are, at the same time, saints and sinners. And that will be true until we complete our earthly journeys. We can relax into God’s arms, finally and fully, when we meet our Maker beyond this world. The new life that we now know in part, a life free from sin, is a foretaste of the resurrected life that we will know fully in the life to come.

Jimmy Piersall died last month at the age of 87. In eternity he now knows that there is indeed no condemnation. But we can start to celebrate that reality *today*. We are free to be whatever it is that God has made us to be; free to be you and me, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.