

MAN'S GREATEST IMPERATIVE

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on January 8, 1967 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

I shall begin by reading to you three very important passages of scripture. Each of the three has something in common with the other two. As I read them I should like for you to watch for what they have in common. The first is the incident of the rich young ruler that came to Jesus: "And as he was going forth into the way, there ran one to him, and kneeled to him, and asked him, Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life? And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? none is good save one, even God. Thou knowest the commandments, Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor thy father and mother. And he said unto him, Teacher, all these things have I observed from my youth. And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said unto him. One thing thou lackest: go, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shall have treasure in heaven: and come follow me." (Mark. 10: 17-21).

Jerusalem and Philippi

The second of these passages concerns the sermon on Pentecost which concludes with this line: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly, that God hath made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified. Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and the rest of the apostles, Brethren, what shall we do? And Peter said unto them, Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:36-38).

The third passage finds Paul at the city of Philippi. He has been thrown into prison under a false accusation. "But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns unto God, and the prisoners were listening to them; and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison-house were shaken: and immediately, all the doors were opened; and everyone's bands were loosed. And the jailor, being roused out of sleep and seeing the prison doors open, drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, saying, Do thyself no harm; for we are all here. And he called for lights and sprang in, and, trembling for fear, fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house. And they spake the word of the Lord unto him, with all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, immediately." (Acts 16:25-33).

What Do These Passages Have in Common?

First of all, they contain a basic fundamental question: "What must I do to be saved?" In the first passage we find, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" In the second passage, "Brethren, what shall we do?" And in the third passage, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

They also have in common a second thing: the answer in each case is in terms of Christ. In that first passage Jesus told the young man to keep the commandments. Then he told him to sell his possessions and give to the poor. Finally, he included the most vital thing of all, the command to "Come, follow me." In the second instance the sermon had been about Christ. The people, pricked in their hearts, were told to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of their sins. In the third passage Paul and Silas heard the Roman jailor ask, "What must I do to be saved?" They gave the answer, "Believe on the Lord Jesus and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house." Then "they spake the word of the Lord unto him." In each case there is the question, "What must I do?" and in each case the answer involves Christ. The Old Testament worthies rolled their sins forward to be taken out of the way only when Christ died on the cross. Those of us who have lived since Christ's day have no chance of heaven unless we have it in terms of Christ.

Imperative ... or ... Optional?

Man's greatest imperative is to come to Christ and to be saved. An imperative is expressive of a command or exhortation. It is not to be avoided or evaded. It is obligatory, binding, compulsory. Becoming a Christian is in the category of the imperative and not in the category of the optional, if we would live our lives successfully.

Many things in life are optional. I am a great believer, for example, in a young person's attending high school and college, yet I have known many people who lived fine lives who did not attend either. I am a strong believer in getting married, yet I have known many other people who have lived quite successfully and happily without being married. I am an enthusiastic believer in having children, yet again I have known many couples whose lives were radiant and happy who had no children. I am a supporter of travel, of great music, of fine art, of good literature, and many other of the blessings of life, yet I am also sure that lives can be lived constructively and happily without any of these. All of these are valuable and fine, yet they are not absolute essentials. In contrast, there can be no ultimately successful life apart from Christ. In the long ago Christ was visiting one day in the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

“Martha was cumbered about much serving,” and she was concerned that her sister Mary come to assist her. At this point Jesus said, “Martha, Martha, thou art anxious and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful: for Mary hath chosen the good part ...” (Luke 10:41-42). One thing is needful in life--salvation in Christ. Other things help in many ways, but there is only one ultimate, absolute imperative.

The Beginning Point

Being saved begins with the recognition that man is lost. The question, “What must I do to be saved?” implies that a man has already realized that he must do something in order to be saved. That is where the story ought to begin--with a realization that we are not saved just as we are. We are saved only after some things have been done. God has the major part to play, but man also must do something. The apostle Paul, writing to the church at Rome, deals with this subject of salvation in a deep and thorough manner. In the third chapter he says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom. 3:10,23). Being saved begins with a realization that we are lost. In the sermon on the Mount Jesus said, “Enter ye in by the narrow gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many are they that enter in thereby. For narrow is the gate, and straitened the way, that leadeth unto life, and few are they that find it.” (Matt. 7:13-14). Not everyone will be saved; it is just those who do certain things and come to the Savior. Salvation begins with a realization that we are lost. Oh, how we hope that everyone of us will come to that realization. You cannot begin until you feel that you need to do something. Paul also wrote, “For the wages of sin is death.” Then the passage opens up the way of escape, “But the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Lord.” (Rom. 6:23). Remember also the words of Jesus at another time, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father but by me.”

Knowledge of Christ

Our quest for salvation begins when we realize that we are spiritually sick, and leads immediately to the necessity of knowledge of the Savior. We need to read and reread the story of Jesus’ life as told by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, until it becomes real. They tell of the birth of Jesus. He was born of the virgin Mary, a young woman of pure and holy life. He was also the child of the Holy Spirit of God, having no earthly father. When he was thirty years of age he was baptized, not because of his own sins, but “to fulfill all righteousness.” He was tempted but did not succumb. He lived a life in which there was absolutely no flaw. No one has ever been able to point out some incident and say, “There, that was sin.” He worked miracles; he even raised the dead; he taught great truths; and after a time he willingly died on the cross, that man might be redeemed. He was raised from the dead proving that he was divine. He ascended into heaven. Near the close of his story of the life of Jesus, John says, “Many other things therefore did Jesus in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book; but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name.” (John 20:30-31).

What Is Faith?

When the knowledge of the Savior is come it is followed by faith. Faith is an intellectual acceptance of the facts of the life of Jesus. But it is more than an intellectual acceptance of Jesus. It is more than believing that he lived, that he did certain things, that he taught limitless truths, that he died, that he was raised, and that he continues to live. Faith is a personal commitment to Jesus, not as a man, but as the Son of God. Faith is something that takes hold of one’s heart and makes him into a different kind of man. Faith is not something on the surface. Faith believes on the facts of Christ’s life, but faith goes on to lead man to do something.

Making Some Changes

Faith is a dynamic motive power, a new relationship with God and with Christ. It grows out of knowledge, and it leads a man to want to make some changes in his life. Take Saul of Tarsus for an example. When he came to believe that Jesus was not an impostor, but rather the Son of God, he spent three days fasting and praying, and then changed the whole course of his life. Faith leads a man to make this basic change! Before, he has been going away from God, now, he turns and comes toward God. This change is a new attitude toward sin, a basically new attitude toward righteousness, and faith is the motive power that brings it about. It is what every soul on earth needs in order to be regenerated. A man is a derelict, a drifter, until he lets Christ take hold of him and change the direction of his living.

Speaking Out For Christ

Once the decision is made to change, it needs to be made known. Paul said to the Romans, “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord, and shall believe in thy heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved: for with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” (Rom. 10:9-10). Jesus had earlier said, “Everyone therefore who shall confess me before men, him will I also confess before my Father who is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father who is in heaven.” (Matt. 10:32-33). This was also shown us by example when Philip, the evangelist, riding in the chariot with the Ethiopian nobleman, heard the nobleman say, “Here is water, what doth hinder me to be baptized?” Philip said, “If thou believest with all thy heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” (Acts 8:36-37).

The New Birth

The realization that we are lost begins to be fulfilled in the knowledge of Jesus, leads to a faith which takes hold of a man and changes the direction of his life, is made known by word of mouth, finally culminates in what the Bible calls the new birth. Jesus speaks of it in that fashion in the story of Nicodemus, who was a ruler of Israel, when he says, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." (John 3: 3-5). This is the new birth. It begins when we believe, and becomes actual and visible to others when we are buried with our Lord in baptism.

The apostle Paul in that same great letter to the Romans also compared baptism with a death, "Are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried with him in baptism unto death that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life." (Rom. 6:4). Jesus was killed on a cross, buried in a tomb and then raised to walk in newness of life. The old, sinful man dies and is buried. A new man is born--a Christian man. Symbolically he does what Jesus did before him. I read again, "For if we have become united with him through the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection; knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be done away, that so we should no longer be in bondage to sin; for he that hath died is justified from sin." (Rom. 6:5-7).

Is not this a beautiful thing? Here we are in this world, sin within us and about us, and then through the knowledge of Christ we come to believe, and that belief leads us to change the direction of our living. We make it known in our confession of Jesus, and then we seal it as we are buried and the old sinful person dies. We are raised as a new man, made over in the image of Christ, to walk in newness of life. When that happens we have the privilege of wearing the name Christian. We are saved and on our way to heaven. We have the forgiveness of our sins.

Then Comes the Rejoicing

After that comes the rejoicing, "Being therefore justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ; through whom also we have had our access by faith unto this grace wherein we stand; and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God ... and not only so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation." (Rom. 5:1-2, 11). This is God's answer. May we help you carry out your part? Why not now?