

*** The Heights Baptist Church * Series: Truths That Are Killing Us ***
*** Topic: The Importance of Repentance * Gal. 5:7-12 & James 2:17-24 * 11/2/25 ***

MAIN POINT

Two false beliefs related to salvation are:

1. I need to earn my salvation through good works.
2. If I just say the right prayer, I can continue to be as sinful as I want and still go to heaven.

Two important truths related to these false beliefs are:

1. We as Christians are saved by grace alone through faith in Christ.
2. Part of putting our faith in Christ involves repenting of our sins and choosing to walk in obedience to him.

INTRODUCTION

How do you think the world, outside of Christianity, understands grace? Explain.

Everyone runs into false teachings in today's world, whether it is a humanistic pride that says we deserve grace, or a teaching that grace can be earned through faithfulness to a set of rules, or that because of grace, I can be as sinful as I want and still go to heaven.

In today's lesson, we will be continuing to look at the sermon series at the Heights titled "Truths that are killing us." This series is looking at biblical truths that can be taken out of context to the point where they become dangerous distortions of the truth. Today's lesson will be looking at the "truth" that "All you need to do is say a prayer" when it comes to salvation. This can be distorted in a way that can actually keep people from coming to Christ.

UNDERSTANDING

ASK ONE VOLUNTEER TO QUOTE EPHESIANS 2:8-9 AND ANOTHER TO READ TITUS 3:4-6

What essential doctrinal truth do these verses have to say about how we are saved?

We are saved by grace alone through faith in Christ's finished work on the cross

Why do you think so many people try to add works to the salvation message?

People seem to instinctively know that God exists, and that we have done something to offend him. It also seems that people like to be able to have some control over getting what they need, and also to take credit for what they have. Several other answers could be given.

Note to study leader: The church at Galatia was struggling with this issue, as a group of false teachers was telling them they needed to obey the Old Testament law to either earn their salvation or to grow in their walk with Christ. We'll now look at the apostle Paul's guidance to them.

SALVATION BY GRACE ALONE

ASK VOLUNTEERS TO READ GAL. 1:6-8, GAL. 1:15-16, AND GAL. 3:2-3

How would you summarize the truths Paul is urging the Galatians NOT to forget?

Salvation is by grace alone, and this is an essential part of Christian doctrine. And even our growth as Christians is by grace.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ GALATIANS 5:6-12

Note to study leader: Circumcision was required for Israel under the Old Testament Law (Lev. 12:3). Paul is using the example of circumcision to symbolize trying to obey the Old Testament Law.

Describe the two illustrations Paul uses to describe a life lived by grace and not works?

In running a race, we can't run well if someone cuts into our path and intentionally impedes their run. False teachers were hindering the Galatians' understanding of the gospel. The second image is leaven and its use when baking bread. Just as it only takes a small amount of leaven to spread through the entire lump of dough, it only takes a little false teaching to ruin the pure biblical doctrine of a church.

What does the false doctrine requiring circumcision say about the cross?

If there is a single thing that we can do to earn the favor of God, then the cross becomes irrelevant. The cross once and for all did what was needed to redeem people to God—and nothing can take its place.

HOW THE TRUTH OF SALVATION BY GRACE ALONE CAN BE TWISTED TO BECOME A DANGEROUS FALSE DOCTRINE

ASK VOLUNTEERS TO READ ACTS 20:21, ACTS 26:20, 2 COR. 7:10, AND 2 TIM. 2:25

What do these verses show us is an essential part of our faith when coming to salvation, and what does this mean?

Repentance means choosing to change direction. When we repent, we are sorry for our previous life of sin, turning away from it, and turning toward a life with Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book "The Cost of Discipleship", coined the term "cheap grace". This is his label for the false doctrine that we can be forgiven without genuine repentance.

How should the idea of repentance protect us from the dangerous doctrinal errors about grace?

Salvation is not just a way to allow us to go on sinning while escaping God's punishment. It involves us choosing to walk with Christ, and God giving us a new nature that desires relationship with Him.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ MATTHEW 7:23-24

Jesus tells us here that there will be many at the judgment who will be surprised to find out they were never truly saved. How could this be?

False converts may exist since some may be putting their hope in their works rather than on Christ. Others may since they only went through the motions as they prayed to receive Christ, without true repentance.

How might some Christians be contributing to these deadly doctrinal errors?

Some Christians, while attempting to make the gospel more palatable to their non-Christian friends, may talk of brokenness and abundant life but leave out sin, repentance, and hell.

ASK VOLUNTEERS TO READ ROMANS 6:1-4 AND TITUS 2:11-12

What do these two passages tell us about the proper view of grace?

God saves us by grace alone. But we need to view His grace not as a way to keep on sinning without consequence, but rather to rely on His grace to enable us to live our new lives in Christ.

THE EXAMPLE OF ABRAHAM

ASK VOLUNTEERS TO READ GENESIS 15:4-6 AND ROMANS 4:1-5 and 23-25

What lessons are we to learn from the example of Abraham as described in these verses?

Even in the Old Testament, the reason God counted Abraham as righteous was because of his faith, not his works.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ JAMES 2:17-24

How do these verses provide balance to what we read earlier, helping us avoid the pitfalls of “easy believism”?

James shows us that saving faith will be accompanied with receiving a new nature, one that desires to serve God. Abraham demonstrated this when he was willing to sacrifice his only son Isaac, whom he loved, to God. His faith was demonstrated by his works.

THE ILLUSTRATION OF MARRIAGE

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ EPHESIANS 5:31-33

In this famous teaching passage about marriage, Paul tells us, “This is a profound mystery, but I am talking about Christ and the church.” In what way is entering into a marriage relationship a great picture of what it means to become a Christian?

We see a picture of total commitment to each other.

If two people at a wedding get up in front of the audience, and say their “I do’s”, then immediately after the ceremony they go their separate ways and choose never see each other again, what would that say about that marriage?

This is not marriage. It would go beyond allowing a divorce, it could be annulled (declared to have never happened).

APPLICATION

Have I have allowed the idea of justification by works to pollute the doctrine of salvation by grace?

ASK VOLUNTEERS TO READ 2 CORINTHIANS 13:5 AND 2 PETER 1:10-11

We need to examine ourselves, to confirm that we are in the faith!

If you are struggling with wanting to mix works in with grace, consider reading the book of Galatians this week. If you are struggling with wanting to take advantage of grace as an excuse to deliberately keep on sinning, consider reading the book of 1 John this week.

PRAYER

Pray that God would guard us from believing false teaching of “cheap grace”. Pray that we would examine ourselves, to see if we are in the faith, and then to rely on God’s grace to keep us from sinning, rather than as an excuse to keep on sinning.

COMMENTARY

Galatians 5:7-12

5:7-10. Returning to the law hinders spiritual growth and development. Using the metaphor of a race, Paul states that the legalists had cut in on the Galatians' spiritual race and caused them to stumble spiritually. As a result, the Galatians were no longer obeying the truth. Turning to a yeast metaphor, Paul illustrates how quickly a little bit of legalism can contaminate a believer and, indeed, a whole church. Paul, however, expressed his confidence that the Galatians would not depart from the truth. He warned that those who are confusing them will experience God's judgment.

5:11. Another consequence when one retreats to legalism is the removal of the offense of the cross. Before Paul was converted, as a Pharisee, he preached circumcision. Now he is being accused of still preaching circumcision. Paul denies this accusation by pointing to the offense or stumbling block of his gospel. He omitted circumcision, and this omission was an offense to the legalists who attacked him.

5:12. Another consequence of turning to the law is anger. Paul is so angry, he wishes the legalists would go the whole way and castrate themselves as did the pagan priests of the cult of Cybele in Asia Minor. This desire is not a pretty picture, but Paul is completely exasperated by these people who are preaching circumcision and sabotaging the Galatians' faith.

James 2:17-24

2:17. Good wishes consisting of mere talk are empty of all reality and lifeless. Offering only good wishes to the cold and the hungry serves to depress further those who are starving and chilled. They need more than good wishes. They need practical help.

2:18. Verse 18 represents a dialog with an imaginary opponent. The opponent says: You have faith; I have deeds. James responded: Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

Verse 19 speaks to the person claiming to have faith but lacking works. This kind of person merely gives intellectual assent to the creed of monotheism. This basic creed of Judaism appeared in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. The statement is intellectually true, but it doesn't proceed far enough. A person must believe in God to be a Christian, but not everyone who acknowledges the existence of God has made a commitment to Jesus Christ.

Verse 20 calls on the objector to recognize that the conclusions of verses 18-19 are correct while also introducing verses 21-26. James appeals to us to become learners. We can rephrase the question as: "Are you willing to be taught that a barren faith is worthless?"

James selected Abraham and Rahab as examples of people who showed genuine faith by their deeds. Their examples stand in complete contrast. Abraham was the ancestor of both Jews and Gentiles. He provided a sterling example of faith (Heb. 11:8-12). Rahab was a Gentile and a prostitute (Josh. 2:1-24), but Matthew listed her in the genealogy of Christ (Matt. 1:5). Although they came from different backgrounds, both showed the reality of their faith.

Verse 21 picks up the Old Testament incident in which Abraham showed his willingness to offer Isaac as a sacrifice (Gen. 22:1-18). Verse 23 refers to the incident in which "Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6), which took place at least thirty years before that of Genesis 22.

Verse 22 states two facts about Abraham's faith. First, his faith and his actions were working together. Abraham's faith prompted his obedience. It prodded him on to do good works. Second, his faith was made complete by what he did. His obedience demonstrated the integrity of his faith. This is not to say that previously Abraham had a weak faith. His willingness to sacrifice Isaac vividly demonstrated the existence of true faith.

Verse 23 summarizes the entire process. Abraham's willingness to offer Isaac fulfilled the promise of Genesis 15:6. Abraham's obedience showed he was a righteous man. God declared Abraham righteous as a matter of grace. Abraham showed the reality of this righteousness by his actions in Genesis 22. As a result of this obedience, God drew Abraham into a closer fellowship with him and called him God's friend. Note that Abraham did not merely determine that God would be his friend. God initiated the action. God reached out to him and gave him the privilege of intimacy and closeness.

Verse 24 presents the conclusions about Abraham. Abraham had shown the reality of his faith by his willingness to offer Isaac in obedience to God's command. We are made right in God's sight through a faith which produces works. This does not claim that God justifies his people by our deeds. The Bible insists that saving faith must show itself by visible commitment to the Lord and compassion for others. Faith alone will bring salvation to anyone, but saving faith does not come alone. It is accompanied by works which show the genuineness of faith.