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READING ASSIGNMENT FOR STUDENTS TO BE READ BEFORE MEETING FOR LESSON 7

Lesson 7: HOLD onto Faith!

Doctrines 8 & 9:

This week's Reading: Equipped for Battle, authored by Major Jim Garrington

Jim Garrington, Equipped for Battle: Personal Perspectives on Wesleyan beliefs and practices, based on the Articles of War, the membership document of The Salvation Army (The Salvation Army USA Central Territory, 2002), 87-95.

Doctrine 8 & 9 Staying Saved

The eighth doctrine of The Salvation Army is basically a combination of two Bible verses: Ephesians 2:8 and I John 5:10. (They are taken from the King James Version here, so the grammar is a little archaic.)

Doctrine 8: We believe that we are justified by grace, through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ; and that he that believeth has the witness in himself.

We need to look at this doctrine's key words one at a time;

FAITH: We talked about faith in the last chapter, remember? If we have faith in Jesus, we entrust ourselves to him. We literally place our eternal life in His hands.

JUSTIFICATION: This is what most people are talking about when they refer to "being saved." We are definitely not "just" (free from injustice or sin). But because Jesus took our guilt upon Himself and carried it to the cross, God has issued the verdict of "not guilty." We have been acquitted, which is roughly the meaning of "justified".

GRACE: No one deserves this privileged treatment, and that is where grace comes in. Grace is God's habit of doing nice things for us- like sending Jesus to rescue us from eternal damnation-that we can never earn or deserve...prevenient grace... is the grace that God gives us to enable us to respond to Him, even while we are still wallowing in our depravity. This eighth doctrine, quoted above, refers to "saving grace", which God offers each of us to rescue us from sin and death. Grace is a lot like mercy, only more so.

The first part of our eighth doctrine could be expressed sort of like this: God mercifully saves us, even though we do not deserve it, if we will respond to his offer of salvation by entrusting ourselves to Jesus Christ.

The second half of the doctrine states: "...he that believeth hath the witness in himself." What is that all about?

It simply means that if you know Jesus, you know that you are saved and going to heaven. This part of the doctrine is almost a direct quote from I John 5:10: "Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart." But there are a lot of people who are not so sure. There are basically three reasons for this uncertainty:

They are not really saved!

If I am talking to someone who may not know the Lord, I usually ask them two questions (borrowed from Evangelism Explosion) to try to see where they stand. The first is very simple and refers to this "witness" that we are talking about: "If you were to die tonight, do you know for certain that you would wake up in heaven?" Most people do not know. They usually respond with something like, "Well, I hope I would wake up in heaven!" A lot of these people are hoping in vain because they have not yet turned from their sins and are not trusting Jesus for salvation.

It is possible to think that you are going to heaven when you are not. But that is not assurance that is presumption! People presume upon the love and mercy of God without ever meeting the requirements of repentance and faith.

Another reason that people lack assurance is:

2. They have “backslidden”.

This means that they are living in active rebellion against God. They are believers and know what God expects of them but choose to do something entirely different. This disobedience has the inevitable effect of making them unsure of their salvation. They know that if they were to stand before Judgment right now, they would have to answer some very embarrassing questions. This uncertainly is actually a good thing. It may result in the person repenting and coming back to obedient faith in Christ. As Wesleyans, we believe that flagrant, intentional rebellion against God may indeed result in the loss of our eternal reward! (More about that in a moment).

3. They do not dare hope that they really are saved!

This is really strange. Some people have turned from their old way of life. They have realized that only Jesus, through His sacrifice on the cross, can save them. They are even trusting Him to save them, but they have no assurance of salvation at all! If you believe that Jesus can rescue you from sin and death, why not relax and let Him do it?

In contrast to members of the cults and of non-Christian religions, we can know that we are saved and going to heaven. There are several ways we can know this:

1. The inner witness of the Spirit.

This is what John refers to in I John 5:10. Paul backs him up in Romans 8:16: “The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we’re God’s children.” There is a subjective something that we sense within us.

My good friend, Burghardt Bargel (who is now with our Lord) was one of the most godly people I ever met. The old sergeant-major who led him to Christ wisely told him that he was glad that Bargel had prayed to receive Christ, but he (the CSM) was not going to tell him that he was a child of God. The Holy Spirit would personally communicate that to him. As Bargel walked home that night, he wondered how the Holy Spirit would do that. That night he heard God speak audibly, “You are my child.”

This sort of thing does not happen to everybody. In fact, I have never heard of it happening to anyone else. The main thing is: God does let us know!

2. The promise of God.

God has told us what we have to do to be saved; repent and believe. He has done the rest! I John 5:11-13 expresses this clearly: “And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.” This is very straightforward! Nevertheless, there are some marginal groups who do not believe that you can know for certain that you are saved. They struggle with this verse.

3. The testimony of a changed life.

Conversion means change. A friend of mine told me very empathetically, “The essence of conversion is change.” He was convinced that if you were not changed, you were not really converted. He was right. If you “entrust yourself” to Jesus, is it too much to expect Him to work a few improvements on you? If you do not need them, then you are already perfect! But if you are not perfect, then you should be getting better!

If however, you are not interested in God’s plans for your improvement, you are living very dangerously. That is the whole point of the ninth doctrine:

Doctrine 9: We believe that continuance in a state of salvation depends upon continued obedient faith in Christ.

Not all Christians believe this. One whole branch of the Church believes, “once saved, always saved.” These are sincere brothers and sisters who base their conclusions on Scripture and on a deep respect for the sovereignty of God. It even sort of makes sense. I find it hard to imagine how someone can taste the sweetness of a life with Jesus and then dump it.

But this sort of thing does happen.

A seminary student asked one of his seminary professors if he believed in the “eternal security of the believer”, which is a more educated way of referring to “once saved, always saved.” The professor replied, “Yes, I believe in the eternal security of the believer- but only of the BELIEVER!” that is the whole point. We become Christians, “believers,” when we repent and entrust ourselves to Jesus in faith. We voluntarily invite Him to come into our hearts and lives and be our personal friend and King. We can also quit believing. We can kick Jesus out again!

My father told me of an alcoholic who had come to Christ through the ministry of The Salvation Army’s Adult Rehabilitation program. This man received forgiveness for his sins and his life was completely turned around. Eventually he became a Salvation Army officer. Then one morning his wife awoke to find him

gone. A note on his pillow read, "I liked my old life better."

This is unimaginable to me. How could someone who has "tasted and seen that the Lord is good" turn his back on the Savior? We have the terrible freedom to turn away from God, and some people do exactly that.

This is a highly controversial topic. Christians of opposing opinions have been arguing this point for a long time. Normally, however, I choose not to join the debate. I do not think it is that big of a deal. As long as I am a believer, I have eternal security, just like my Calvinist friends say. I am under no compulsion to persuade them to my perspective ... unless they are professing to be Christians and are obviously not living in "continued obedient faith in Christ."

The warning in Hebrews 10:26 is too graphic to be ignored: "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. The rest of the passage is even stronger; showing this to be the ultimate blasphemy, and God will not allow this to go unpunished.

I have no intention of instilling fear in you. Let me make clear what the Bible is not talking about here.

This does not mean that we lose our salvation every time we sin after becoming Christians. I have known people who thought that they had to get saved all over again – many times- because they slipped up so many times. They lived in terror that, if they happened to die during one of those periods between sin and re-conversion, they would go to hell. Hey lighten up! This is not what God means at all! The Bible says, "If we deliberately keep on sinning..." This type of sinning is not something that happens overnight. But if you insist on ignoring and disobeying God, again and again, then one of these days you will find yourself all alone. The Spirit of God will have left you. You will have no hope. And because you have rejected God's grace, you probably will not even really know what has happened.

I do not know how long this takes, whether you can deliberately sin three times or three million times. Even though our Heavenly Father has infinite love and almost infinite patience, there will come a time when He will have had enough.

We do not want to get this out of balance and go off the deep end in either direction. To presume on God's goodness is the most dangerous thing anybody can do. To say, "Who cares if I extend a little beyond the borders of what is right? I can always ask God to forgive me!" is worse than stupid. It is blasphemy! We read in Galatians 6:7-8a: "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction.

On the other hand, I went through a time of rebellion myself when I was in college. I had become a Christian as a pre-adolescent. During my teen years I was a zealous witness to my friends and schoolmates. But about the time I turned 20, I decided to take a break from obeying God. I "deliberately kept on sinning" for about a year, before I got the thing straightened out with God. I rationalized everything thoroughly, convincing myself that what I was doing really was not that bad. But deep down inside, I knew better. And at the end of that time, God took me back and forgave me. So how long would I have had to keep that up for God to disown me? I have no idea. I also do not want to find out.

This is not something we have to go through! The tenth doctrine, which we will look at in the next lesson says, "We believe that it is the privilege of all believers to be 'wholly sanctified,' and that their 'whole spirit and soul and body' may 'be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.'" (I Thessalonians 5:23)

We don't have to sin at all! To be sure, I Corinthians 10:12 warns us about being overconfident: "So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall." But verse 13 says that God will help us keep from falling: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

Visualize this as being in a room with a lion. The temptation is the lion, slowly closing in on you. You back up until you are against the wall, never taking your eyes off the lion for fear it will attack. But as you press back against the wall your hand finds a doorknob. There is a way of escape! What do you do?

You savor the temptation a little longer, and probably the lion gets you!

You immediately turn the knob, open the door and get out of there!

You see, we have some responsibility in avoiding sin. If you have a weakness, avoid setting yourself up! I have another friend who got involved with a married woman who was separated from her husband. He knew what the Bible had to say about the relationship. He knew it was adultery. But he really liked the woman and did not want to lose her friendship, so he did not want to break off the relationship completely. Once he complained to me, "Why can't we just have a normal, friendly relationship without it always getting so physical?" to which I felt obliged to reply, "It might help if you didn't have her over to your place alone. It might help if you limited your contact to public places like church or restaurants. What do you expect when you set yourself up like that?" Everyone faces temptation. Temptation is not sin – yielding to temptation is sin. We have to put up a fight. "Resist the Devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7b). or as Martin Luther said, "You can't keep the

birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.

The best defense against temptation is a good offense. Get to know Jesus better. Some of the aspects of that are illustrated in the following Scriptures. What are they?

- Matthew 26:41 Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.
- 2 Peter 3:18a But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
- 2 Timothy 2:15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.
- Ephesians 6:11 Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the Devil's schemes.
- Romans 12:1-2 Therefore I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God-This is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing, and perfect will.
- Romans 12:9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.
- Philippians 4:8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy- think about such things.

The simplest way to summarize all this is: We should be so filled up with the Spirit of Jesus that there is no room for any other spirit. This very conveniently is the topic of our tenth doctrine...