

A Sermon for DaySpring
By Burt L. Burleson
“God’s Masterpiece”
Deuteronomy 11: 18-28; Romans 3: 22b-28; Matthew 7: 21-29
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Salvation is a real work of Divine art, wonderful, beautiful, multi-layered, you don't see all there is to see of it at first glance... or even second and third glances. Like art, it grows on you and you grow on it. As you change you perceive what you couldn't perceive before.

What you're being saved from.

What you're being saved to.

Imagine a sculpture... it's modern art and so it's abstract in nature. The sculpture is on display in a great big hall full of lots of on-lookers... everyone there has some experience with this piece but not everyone experiences the same things.

Let me describe for you, three of the patrons...

Three different perceivers.

One of those making her way through the room is there with her kindergarten class for a field trip. She sees the great big sculpture and she's amazed at how strong and smooth and shiny it looks. It's so solid, standing there made out of that stone. **“Nothing could knock it over.”** It's way bigger than she is and something in her wants to climb it. She's also very curious about what it will feel like. She also notices the ropes all around it keeping her away and the impressive looking folks in uniforms who seem to her like they certainly would not let her play on it. She skips around it, happy to be there.

Our second patron is a student from the University... a grad student in geology. He is looking hard at the stone... marveling at the marble. He understands how strong the substance is and he can appreciate the intricacies and colors of this particular piece. He thinks he knows where it was quarried. He notices the shades running through it... the lines... and can imagine what is beneath the surface. **“It is flawless,”** he surmises. He stands as close as he can get, admiring the purity of the rock.

Finally, our last viewer sits a ways away on a bench where she can see, really see, the piece. She's been there awhile... it's definitely not her first trip to the museum. She knows about the rock and all... why it was chosen and how it was fashioned. She can see the nuances of the marble and can appreciate them... but she doesn't zero in on them. She looks at the entirety of the thing wondering what the artist intended. **“What is the sculpture trying to say?”** She's communing with it. It's so firmly planted but looks like it's trying to soar... to expand... it's grounded but being set free all at the same time. She knows something of the artist... has read of her... she knows her story. She knows some of the circumstance that gave rise to the piece... and she sits peacefully, gratefully, seeing and enjoying the art and even looking for herself in it and even being motivated by it.

The Bible reflects salvation as a reality that can be perceived in many ways and that is appropriated at ever deepening levels. The three texts we read help us to see that and it's apparent that those who put the Lectionary together so that we'd read these texts back to back, want us to be thinking about the nature of our salvation.

It isn't one thing. We are being saved from lots of things.

In Deuteronomy there is a word to the people that encourages them to ingrain the commandments into their lives for the sake of obedience. **“Learn this so you will do this.”**

“Put them in your hearts and on your hands... on your heads. Talk about them all the time... put them on display in your homes. And once you know them, if you do them... things will go well for you. It's your choice. Do what I tell you and you'll be blessed... live otherwise and suffer the consequences.”

It's salvation as stability. Salvation that saves you from the chaos of an aimless life. We are saved from the limits of our perspective... saved from our instincts shaped by and in a fallen world. Saved from our sins... and the holes we dig for ourselves with them.

This is salvation that comes from a moral vision
that came to the people...
from God as a gift.

“Do this and you will live.”

Bear in mind, this is a corporate word... it's written to the community... the nation. When Deuteronomy says **“you”** it means, **“you all.”**

And bear in mind that the book of Job is in the Old Testament and bear in mind your own experience... good people do suffer, everyday... and bad people do prosper, everyday. **“Why do you let the wicked prosper, God?”** That's the way the Psalmist prays it.

God, in Deuteronomy, isn't giving a no-pain-guarantee via their goodness.

God is simply saying, **“It's my world and I know how it works best. Life is sacred and holy and it's all connected up...”**

Live like it doesn't matter

and like it isn't sacred

and like you aren't connected

and there are going to be consequences.”

A few years back we went with Abby for her college orientation. One of the speakers got up and said, **“I've been here a long time... I've been doing this a long time and I've got some words for the wise...”**

Learn how to manage your time...

Go to class...

Talk to the professors...

And be careful what you take.

If you do that you'll do well.”

There are some fundamentals that are just a part of the fabric of academic life. This is sort of like the “The Commandments” or “The Plan of Salvation” for a college

freshman. Submission to these basic rules of thumb will make all the difference and save you a lot of pain... they are saving.

That's where the story of salvation begins Biblically. **“Here's the way to have a good and strong life and productive life.”**

And for most of us, this is where the journey of salvation begins... the journey with the Divine. It begins in morality and in principle. It begins with an awareness that there is something much larger than you and you'd better respect it. What we come to rightly perceive is that there is a right way to do life and things go better for us if we conform to it. This is where we must begin... and most of us do. **It's the first Doctrine any of us get... “Don't touch that... you'll get burned.”** And if we mind... we are saved from that pain. That's where we all begin.

But the Salvation Story doesn't stop there... There is more to perceive in this infinite artwork. And what is reflected Biblically will always be reflected in our lives and in our lives together.

We start with law and what usually happens... it just does, is that we come to misperceive the law's function. The law's function is to help us do life well... but usually we get that all messed up and we start believing it can impart life. We start mistaking the rules for the reality... the ropes around the art for the work of art itself.

Israel did it... but so do we.

We start imagining that the law changes God
or that obeying the law changes God...

God's heart is different because I get Deuteronomy down.

I achieve some status with God by my obedience. I make things right with God because I've somehow been able to mind my Ps and Qs. I know we'd never teach that in VBS but it just seems to be in our nature to move in that direction.

We get the externals right...

they look strong and shiny...

and we see ourselves that way.

We start having great confidence in our morality... and confidence leads to other things... pride... maybe self-righteousness, after all, **“look how well we're doing with Deuteronomy...”**

And then principles become laws and the laws get stretched out and expounded upon... and more rigid. And at some point they become tools of exclusion. It's just human nature... and there's not a religion or a denomination or a person who hasn't lived that story... laws to legalism.

That's our tendency and our Biblical story... the attempt at self-righteousness. It never works but everyone tries it nonetheless. Over and over... it's almost like we have to go there. It's our story.

But life will always want to take us beyond that. There'll be a time, regardless of how genuinely good we are, where we'll have looked in the mirror honestly. It happens.

“Saul, Saul, what are you doing to me?” Romans is a result of Paul seeing clearly in that mirror. **“What I want to do, I can’t do... what I don’t want to do, I keep on doing... What a wretched man I am.”**

If we’re at all open, if we’re watchful at all, there’ll come a day when we’ll hear it... “Burt, Burt ...” perceive a voice in our heart that will not let us fool ourselves anymore and maybe we’ll work harder for a while, for a long while. Pray more... do lots of good things... but something will remain that is true about us and we’ll finally have to say, **“All have sinned... I am a sinner.”**

You’ll realize the subtle selfishness in your life... motivations less than pure. You’ll face up to that jealousy that won’t disappear with your praying.

You’ll be honest about how judgmental you are... constant critique.

You’ll admit you haven’t sacrificed for someone in pain.

The mirror will be saying, **“it’s you, you’re the man.”**

And when we know that... it’ll be good news to hear Paul saying, **“And all are justified freely by his grace.”** That’s when we will begin to perceive the cosmic reality of salvation... some sense of what is true inside the heart of God... and like prodigal sons we head home to our extravagant and gracious Father.

Salvation is more than doing right for the sake of a decent life (as good as that is)... it’s about being right with God and what Paul pounds and pounds and pounds through the book of Romans is that it isn’t at all dependant on you.

It’s not about your behavior

it’s about God’s heart

and in Christ we have seen God’s heart. That’s it!

You have to perceive what the reality of the situation is. GRACE is the bottom line and you’d better get to that eventually.

You are loved and it’s on the house if you want it. Faith is simply saying yes to the gift. It’s really that simple... you realize you can’t achieve this... just receive this. You receive “a rightness” with God... You are saved from the distance between you and the Divine. Saved from your endless hand-wringing about being good enough. Saved from the damnations of should’s and ought’s heaped on your head. Saved from your sin.

Deuteronomy is about the salvation (a goodness of life) that comes to us through our doing. We are saved from our sinful instincts to a life full of goodness.

Romans is about the salvation (the gift of life) that comes to us through our receiving. Grace is yours... God is yours... You are **“freely justified.”** Take a load off. We are saved from the demands for perfection to an understanding that we have all of God we’re ever going to get

Both Deuteronomy and Romans are perspectives on a beautiful work that God is doing.

The last perspective, however, should always belong to Jesus...

... Who says, **“The ones who enter into the Kingdom of Heaven are the ones who do the will of my Father who is in heaven.”**

At first glance, you can hear some of Deuteronomy in there, huh? **“Depart from me, you evil doers.”**

And probably we should keep in mind that Matthew is Jewish, writing to a Jewish audience that has done life via the law... but more than that we should keep in mind that this text is a part of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus lays out his law. Kind of like a new Moses... with a new law... so it's not so centered on Thou Shalt Not's as it is Blessed art thou's. He's taking it all further and deeper.

And so we read things about turning the other cheek... nonviolence

And giving our extra coat away... simplicity

And loving our enemy... controlling emotions

And going to our closet to pray... humility

And not judging. Advanced spirituality.

The sermon begins with the Beatitudes, which aren't about your doing at all... but your being and your becoming. Attitudes of being... remember **“Blessed are the poor in spirit... for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”**

Blessed are the meek... for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those hungry for God... they will be filled.

Blessed are the pure in heart... they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers...

they will be called God's children.”

It's about what you are and what you can become... the masterpiece of your life. Being made right through Christ is such a wonderful gift. Being made like Christ... that's salvation at another level.

And not everyone goes there. Not everyone can enter into the Kingdom of Heaven... the realm of God... this mode of existence. It's a way of being that is beyond rule following and doctrine knowing. Which are wonderful things but still may not make you whole and at peace...

There is something you can only experience by being tuned into what God intends. The path Jesus leads us down is saving. We're saved from our blindness... from our brokenness... from our past. We're saved from ourselves, “cheap grace.” We're saved from our sin... and the small life it imposes on us.

Think of it as an art patron who gets it, who is changed by communing with the art See it as a way of being that allows you to experience the life of God... God's salvation.

Heaven is a realm of life that is to be experienced here and there... and some people can't... or at least they're limited. They're like kindergartners skipping about a grand sculpture without the maturity to appreciate the art. Or budding young geologists who can't see the beauty or depth of what the artist intended because they're obsessing about the physical properties of the rock.

Or worse, it's like someone who won't look at the art at all.

Who couldn't care less.

Who believes there is nothing really to enjoy.

How can you enjoy and appreciate God's masterpiece of love without becoming a connoisseur and creator of love yourself.

“Depart from me... we don't really know one another.”

Salvation is a great work of art. God's masterpiece. It is about living the right way... And it is about knowing the grace of God is yours for the receiving. But more than that it's about becoming and enjoying all that the Great Artist intended.

God isn't just interested in getting you through life in one piece
or through the Pearly Gates pardoned...

God wants you to enjoy and know
the fullness of what he has created...

Become a coinsurer of that, why don't you.

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