

## 1 Septuagesima – Matthew 20; 1 Cor 9&10

Have you ever talked to someone who doesn't believe that baptism saves? He will probably say that baptism can't save you because your good works can't save you. Then you have to explain that baptism is not our good work. It is God's work. It is the washing in which the Holy Spirit gives us a new birth and a new life through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Tit 3:5; 1 Pet 1:3; 3:21; Rom 6:3). But then he might respond to you by pointing out that many people have been baptized, but they end up falling away. They end up not being saved in the end. But this is how you should respond. Of course, it is sadly true that many people who have been baptized have fallen away and end up not being saved. But that doesn't mean that baptism doesn't save. Those people who were baptized were saved. God gave them salvation. But sadly, due to their own unbelief, they lost their salvation.

This brings up a very serious issue, which hardly any Christian wants to talk about and some even deny. A Christian who is presently saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ can lose his salvation. It is possible for you to fall away. St. Paul tells us that the Israelites were all in the cloud of God's glory. They all passed through the Red Sea. They all shared in the same baptism in the sea. They all ate and drank from the same Spirit and from the same Rock who was Christ. Yet their bodies were left in the wilderness. Many of them fell away. They were saved. They received the same token of God's favor as everyone else. But because of their unbelief they died in the desert. Paul reminds us of these things as a warning to us. You have salvation right now. But don't imagine that you can live like an unbeliever and keep that salvation.

We should take this warning seriously. We shouldn't treat faith and salvation as if they are easily achieved. Salvation is achieved only by the work of God's Son who suffered for the sins of the world, died, and rose again. Faith does not come about by our own reason and strength. It is the work of the Holy Spirit who turns our hardened hearts into believing hearts. It is when we forget that salvation is a free gift of God that we lose it.

Of course, this happens when a Christian gives into the pleasures of this world and his own sinful passions. Perhaps they first treat it as a joke. They don't take seriously the danger of falling into the darkness of this unbelieving world. This is why St. Paul warns us. He tells us not to worship idols or commit sexual immorality, as some of the people of Israel did. God has made your body a temple of the Holy Spirit. When you take your body and give it over to pornography, fornication, and other sexual perversions, then you are driving out the Holy Spirit. You are replacing the faith in your heart with the pleasure of your flesh. You are replacing the promise of the resurrection of your body with the fleeting thrill of your hormones. This kind of living goes hand-in-hand with idol worship. Those who give into sexual immorality adopt a different kind of worship. They feel the need constantly to justify themselves, replacing the Lord who saved them from their sins with a false god of convenience who affirms them in what they already think and feel. This seems to be the quickest way in which people make shipwreck of their faith and lose their salvation.

But there is another way people lose their salvation. It happens when they treat their salvation as something God owes them. They keep tabs on all the things they have supposedly done for God. They went to church faithfully, paid their tithes, had the right opinions, opposed the immoral ideals pushed by an immoral culture, and they even had

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to suffer a bit for it. They bore the heat of the day. Yet, they don't see that all of this was a gift from God.

You see, it is not only a gift that you have been saved by the blood of Jesus Christ, baptized into his name, and given his saving gospel. It is also a pure gift from God that you have a church family that confesses the pure Word of God. God gave you much more than a tenth of your body, soul, and all your goods. He provides everything you need to support this body and life. It is by his grace that you have been taught right from wrong and haven't fallen for the perverted teachings of the dying culture around you. And especially when you have to suffer for standing on the truth, this is a tremendous privilege and blessing from God, because it refines your faith in Christ by driving you back to the sure promise of the gospel.

It is when we forget that the entire Christian life is a gift that we begin to lose our salvation. But when you know that the entire Christian life is a gift, then you can be confident that God will keep you steadfast in the saving faith until you die. Your joys as well as your sorrows are prepared for you by God himself. Even when you must battle against the unbelief that plagues your sinful flesh and face all kinds of temptations, this is all part of God training you to find your escape in the wounds and words of Jesus Christ your Savior. God promises that you will not be tempted more than you can bear. No matter how hard the heat of these earthly trials beat down on you, God promises that he will see you through and give you what is good.

The first workers in our Lord's parable forgot that the entire day in the vineyard was a gift. They treated it as a contract they made with the owner. Now, it's true that they agreed with the owner of the vineyard on a denarius. This is what we have done in our baptism. It's what we do whenever we hear his gospel promise. We agree with God. But this agreement with God is not some contract we have made with him. It isn't a deal we have negotiated. No, we agree with God simply by believing his Word. We trust him, and as we grow in this trust, we learn to confess our Savior with our fellow believers.

A little baby is baptized into Christ. God says to that child, "You are mine." The Holy Spirit gives faith to that child to hold onto the promise of God. That little baby agrees, not to some terms of a contract, but to the words of eternal life. The Holy Spirit, who gave the child faith by the Word of God, continues to strengthen that same child in the Word and faith until he dies. Every cross he bears, every confession he makes, every time he learns to repent of his sins and walk in the works God himself has prepared for him – it is all by God's grace. It is all a free gift.

The first workers treated their work in the vineyard as nothing other than their end of the bargain. In doing so, they grew to look down on their fellow workers who were hired later in the day. This brings up another way in which Christians fall away from the faith and lose their salvation. They despise their fellow Christians. Their love grows cold for those who perhaps aren't as educated or experienced as they are.

Now, obviously there is something to say about experience. St. Paul says that someone who is newly converted to the faith should not be made a pastor. He might get puffed up and fall into the devil's trap. It often happens that those who have only

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recently become Christians think that they know more than they do. They go on the internet and call themselves influencers. Or they start their own churches and their own ministries. They end up leading others away, because they don't have a mature grasp of what God's Word says. Those who enter into the vineyard in the later parts of the day probably shouldn't be given lead positions right away.

But as important as experience is for the life of the church on earth, experience does not give you a greater standing before God. It doesn't give you eternal life. If God has given you more experience than other Christians, then use it to promote their welfare. If God has given you a better understanding of his Word, then use it to build up your brothers and sisters in Christ. Because there is nothing you have that you did not receive. Whatever measure of wisdom you have gained by experience in your walk as a Christian, it is only a testimony to the free gift of salvation God has bestowed on every one of his children, whether rich or poor, smart or foolish, mature or immature, man or woman, young or old, black or white, strong or weak. Faith receives the same precious promise of Christ the Savior.

It is possible to fall away from the faith and lose the salvation God has freely given. But will it happen? As you take seriously God's warning against idol worship, sexual immorality, pride, and unbelief, what do you rely on? How can you have certainty that you will not fall away? You have this only by faith in God's promise. Jesus promises that he will not let anyone snatch you out of his hands or his Father's hands. Do you agree with him? He promises to give you what is right. Is he telling the truth? He has prepared salvation for you, he keeps it in heaven where it remains imperishable, and he promises to keep you in the faith by his gospel until you reach the goal. There is no other response to this sure Word of your Savior than faith. Trust what he says. Agree to what he says. Depend on his words.

It is because of his Word and promise that you can have certainty. As much as you discipline your body, bear your cross, and watch out for the deceit of the devil, the world, and your own flesh, your confidence that you will be saved does not come from how much you discipline, carry, or watch. No, your confidence is always in the same promise first given to you when God called you to faith. It is in Christ who died for you, rose from the dead, and gives you his kingdom. It is his Word and pledge in his gospel and sacraments.

So run the race. Work in the vineyard. Bear the heat of the day. Rejoice when newcomers enter in. Because it's all a gift from God. It's all a testimony to what lies ahead. God has called you into his vineyard with the sure promise that you will reap the fruit of eternal life. In fact, he's already given it to you by his grace in Jesus Christ. Amen.