
1TM 1:15 : GOD SAVES SINNERS ONLY

No. EE37

If we were to boil the gospel down to its very essence, we would be left with three words, and three words only. And so important is each of these three words that if you were to take away or merely dilute the meaning of any one of them, you would be left with something that is less than the true gospel. Any watered down gospel is a perverted gospel, "a different gospel - which is really no gospel at all" (Gl 1:6-10). Such a gospel could not save a single soul. In fact, over the past two thousand years *different gospels* have led countless souls to everlasting perdition.

What are these three words that constitute the very essence, the true heart of the gospel?

God saves sinners!

Exactly this is what our text says: "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners...*" (1Tm 1:15). Elsewhere we read: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: *While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*" (Rm 5:8).

Let us take a closer look at each of these three key words.

WHO IS IT THAT LOVES? THE TRIUNE GOD!

Because the Triune God is who He is, His saving love is something wonderful. It is utterly unique and perfect.

- *It is Christ-centred.* No sinner is ever saved by any other means than the merit of Christ. This is a

fact about which the Word of God leaves no room for misunderstanding (Jn 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Tm 2:5).

Equally important is the insistence in the New Testament on the fact that Christ is either the only Saviour or no saviour at all. This does not permit of even the minutest contribution from us in the form of own moral merit or ceremonial practices (Gl 5:2-4).

- *It is spiritual.* The Holy Spirit is, as it were, the Courier who has come to deliver God's love and salvation. He also sustains it. Without His role in the conviction (Jn 16:7-11), rebirth (Jn 3:5-8; Tit 3:5) and illumination (1Cor 2:10-16) of sinners, nobody can become or stay united with Christ.

- *It is eternal.* It stretches from the beginning of time, through the present and into eternity. Before creation God elected His own loved ones - and He Himself will sustain them until the day of perfection (Jn 6:35-40; Rm 8:28-30; Eph 1:4; 1Tm 1:9; 1Pt 1:20; Rev 13:8; 17:8).

- *It is sovereign.* As Creator, God is the indisputable owner of everything and everybody. Can anyone question His right to pour out His love as and on whom He pleases? (Rm 9:6-29).

- *It is unconditional and undeserved.* It cannot be evoked by any merit on the part of any person who receives it (Acts 13:48; Rm 9:11-13, 16; 10:20; 1Cor 1:27-29; Eph 2:8; Phil 2:12-13; 1Tm 1:9).

- *It is personal.* It is directed at a specific person (Jn 6:39; 10:27; 17:2,6,9,24; Acts 13:48; 18:9-10; Rev 13:8; 17:9).

- *It is corporate.* The true church is the bride of Christ collectively, as an organic unity (2Cor 11:2; Eph 5:25-27; Rev 19:7-9; 21:2).

- *It is universal.* The Lord's beloved are from every tribe and language and people and nation (Rev 5:9; 7:9).

- *It is historic.* These loved ones come from every period in the history of mankind. There will be representatives of every generation at the wedding feast of the Lamb.

WHOM DOES GOD LOVE? SINNERS!

If God does not love every person savingly - after all, millions die in their sin - the question arises: *Who then are these beloved?* Who are the ones that God's redeeming love take hold of? What kind of people inherit eternal life?

The Bible's answer is as clear as a bell: *God saves sinners - as sinners - irrespective of who or what they are, or are not!* He loves the living dead - failures by His perfect standards, rebels against His Law, people who are powerless to change their destiny.

It means that God's love takes hold of nobody *because* he is something. Salvation can never be due to some personal merit on the part of the sinner. People are not saved *because* they have done their best or *because* they have performed better than others. Upbringing, wealth, education, talent or beauty are irrelevant. Nobody is the object of God's saving love *because* he is religious or a regular churchgoer or because he tithes. Neither does confession of one's sins, or piety or restitution serve as a qualification. God does not save people *because* they have been baptised, or nurse the sick or feed the poor or do missionary work. Even calling on the name of the Lord or having the strongest faith can never be the *grounds* for redemption.

To put it differently: God loves sinners *in spite of who they are.* He saves the guilty, the wretched, the filthy, the failures, the drop-outs, the pathetic. He saves the lost, the despondent, the irresolute, the helpless and the hopeless. Christ came for the sake of the blind, the lame, the deaf and the dumb. God saves those who transgress His Law, who fail to meet His standards: atheists, idolaters, blasphemers, Sabbath-breakers, murderers, adulterers, thieves, liars, the immoral, the greedy.

He saves the spiritually dead, the carnal, the worldly, those controlled by Satan, people who are under His wrath, sinners on the highway to hell.

In this connection we need to emphasise a vital truth, one which is so often neglected: God does not only save sinners as sinners; He only saves those sinners *who know that they are sinners and who confess it unreservedly.*

This is what Jesus meant when He said that He only came to save sinners (Mk 2:17; Lk 18:9-14; 19:10). One of the biggest problems with the Jews was their pious complacency. It made them deaf to the gospel.

Why is this? Without an awareness of sin Christ's work of redemption is only of academic importance. At best it may lead to an artificial faith.

More importantly still: God saves sinners to His own glory. And His glory is only served when I truly and fully realise how dependent I am on His mercy - something which is only possible if there is an awareness of sin in me.

HOW DOES GOD'S LOVE FIND EXPRESSION? IN SALVATION!

What happens to a sinner when God's love takes hold of him (or her)? He begins to comprehend something of God's holy righteousness. He sees himself for the despicable sinner that he is. And eventually he sees Christ as the only solution to his terrible dilemma.

This inevitably leads to such a sinner's embracing of the Lord Jesus Christ as his Redeemer and King. Like a drowning man he clings to the Saviour for life and death, for time and eternity. He begins to hate sin and to flee from it. His greatest ambition is to grow more and more in likeness to Jesus - resulting in a growth in godliness.

For this newly saved person his or her brothers and sisters in Christ begin to stand out as if they are painted in neon colours. Nowhere does he feel more at home than among the fellow lovers of the Lord.

Last but not least, he perseveres year after year

against the temptations of the flesh, the enticements of the world and the attacks of Satan.

Of course, the longer I persist in this struggle, the more my awareness of total dependence on my Redeemer grows, and the deeper I hide in Him.

ARE YOU THE OBJECT OF GOD'S SAVING LOVE?

There are only two possible replies to this burning question: "Yes!" or "I am not sure!"

Some will protest:

- Those without hope will say, "*I am in a pathetic position, without God and without hope! Surely He does not love me!*"

This does not mean a thing. The full harvest of the elect has not been brought in yet. Perhaps your heart transplant is just around the corner.

In any case, is the Bible not full of invitations to sinners to repent and run into the open arms of the loving Lord? Why hesitate? Whose fault is it that you are still without hope and without God? The only obstacles in your way are your disobedience, your unwillingness and your unbelief. Surely you and you alone are to blame for your current state!

- Those who have hardened their hearts will say, "*I am not interested!*"

Well, there is no stopping the love of the Lord! The one moment you may be an obstinate rebel, and the next you may find yourself flat on your face before the Lord - His worshipping and zealous disciple. Millions have experienced this. God's love often strikes unexpectedly and totally irresistibly!

- What does the Word have to say to those who are still uncertain about their salvation? The answer is as clear as a bell: "*You need not remain unsure!*"

The invitation in the fifth last text in the Bible still stands as solid as a rock: "*The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever*

wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life!" (Rev 22:17; NIV). And this is not an invitation to take a single sip, it is an instruction to drink again and again.

You may rest assured that anyone who is sincere about his salvation can depend on the Lord's promise in Jn 6:37: "Whoever comes to me I will never, and I mean never, drive away" (The literal meaning of the words in Greek).

To those who are uncertain, these invitations and promises therefore say, "*No matter how many times you have drunk in the past, come again. You remain uncertain because you have thus far been half-hearted and of small faith. Come now, resolute and in faith! Stop making God out to be a liar. His promises can be trusted completely. Come then, sort out this matter, once and for all!*"

- A final word to those who have given a firm reply of "Yes!", those who know that God has taken hold of them once and for all: "Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (2Pt 1:10-11).

Serve, therefore, the Lord with an undivided heart! Let it be the driving passion of your life to please Him and to glorify His name!

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