

## The Sinner's Need of Christ

A sermon by Larry Kirkpatrick

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### OUTLINE

The Unfitness of the Sinner	2
Contractual Salvation?	3
We Bring Nothing; or Do We?	4
Not Even the Exercise of the Will	5
The Peril of Outward Correctness of Behavior	6
Necessity of a Power Working From Above	8
Jacob's Ladder: We Do Not Climb	9
Conclusion	10

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If today's message title sounds familiar, likely you have read the same heading for chapter two of Ellen G. White's book *Steps to Christ*. She proceeds logically in that masterful work, establishing God's love, the sinner's need for it, the whys and wherefores of repentance, and so on. Last week, brother Robert addressed the first point. Next week, brother Sy Go will carry on with the third.

Our goal in this series is not to copy E. G. W. or "confirm" her; we want to pay closer attention to crucial things. Humans are an impatient race; we want to build a moon rocket when we have hardly mastered propellor aircraft. We race beyond the basics without mastering them. Then, without them, we crash. This much is certain: if we do not recognize our need for Christ, our Christian experience will crash.

### **The Unfitness of the Sinner**

Perhaps we are only minimally aware of our great need. Even Mrs. White seemed to struggle with finding language to describe it.

The first two paragraphs of her chapter use more than a dozen similar phrases to make the point: The sinner has "no joy in holiness," he seeks "to hide," he is "not in harmony," he has "no joy in communion," he is "not happy," he "shrinks," he has "no joy," there is in him "no answering chord," his "thoughts are alien," "discordant," heaven would be "torture" to him, he longs to be "hidden from" God, he senses his own "unfitness." Her most remarkable description of the sinner is that he "would welcome destruction" in order to be hidden from the face of Jesus (*Steps to Christ*, p. 18).

She only echoes Scripture. Isaiah sees God's glory and is undone (Isaiah 6:1-5). Peter experiences Jesus' miracle and falls before Him, declaring, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful

man!” (Luke 5:1-11). Hosea, Jesus, and James foretell the terror of the lost (Hosea 10:8; Luke 23:30; Revelation 6:16). But first was Adam and Eve—after their sin they hid from God in Eden (Genesis 3:8).

Should we be surprised? “All that do wickedly” will be burned up (Malachi 4:1). “Our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29 cf. Deuteronomy 4:24). If the goodness of God leads us in the direction of repentance (Romans 2:4), if Jesus turns on the lights of conscience for all men (John 1:9), if people have at least a semi-functional sense of right and wrong (Romans 2:14, 15), then we understand: men find themselves subject to two irreconcilable desires. One is for right, one for wrong. One will prevail. Along the way, choices are made for truth or self-deception.

### **Contractual Salvation?**

Although we declare today, quite sharply, the depth of the sinner’s need of salvation, we do so with a care. It is one thing to say that all men need Christ; it is another to say that men cannot, through the power of Christ, be made righteous. One place where Western Christians have often gone astray is the relationship of faith and works.

When the Greek of the New Testament was translated into Latin by Jerome (A.D. 354 - 420), he used the Roman law term *justificatio*, understood by the Roman mind as meaning to declare right, where he instead should have used, “make righteous.” Thus, the Vulgate introduced a Roman model for what salvation is all about. Its ideas were taken from the Latin judicial world.

Only later did the consequence become apparent; it led, at last, to the “evangelical” obsession about guaranteeing people places in heaven. We hear it today in the idea “once saved, always saved.” The bottom-line meaning of salvation is misunderstood as being a legal

declaration and a contract with Deity. This distortion is unspeakably damaging to the potential for genuine liberation. After all, fallen nature being what it is, if salvation is available on a contractual basis, then, in the end, the ultimate issue will always be the contract. (The New Covenant is more than mere unilateral external contract; it includes continued surrender by man and the promise of active heart rewriting by the Holy Spirit.)

Jerome's contemporary, Augustine (A.D. 347 - 420), who knew Latin but not Greek, understood that man could not truly obey anyway, because of his corruption by Original Sin. Such being the case, a contractual plan of salvation was the logical, nay, the only option.

Things deteriorated for 1,000 years until, at last, Tetzel (A. D. 1469 - 1519) was selling indulgences to finance the building of St. Peter's basilica in Rome. By giving money to the church, it was said that one might even purchase forgiveness for future sins. At this point, Luther (A.D. 1483 - 1546) countered that salvation was by grace through faith alone, and that men are saved by trusting in Christ.

On this count, Luther was right.

### **We Bring Nothing; or Do We?**

We must never forget that "The metaphor of human relationship is more fundamental than that of the law court" (James D. G. Dunn, Allan M. Suggate, *The Justice of God*, p. 36). When we think of the sinner's need of Christ, we should do so first from this relational perspective.

How then might you answer the Bible question, "What do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Corinthians 4:7). Our answer should be as in 1 Chronicles 29:14: "All things come of Thee, and of Thine own have we given Thee." How could you even turn to God if He did not

first give the gift of turning? Since everything that we have comes from God, we have nothing of our own to bring to Him. We have no currency, no merit, no, not even any obedience that we can claim as our own property, to offer Him.

Here, then, we must pause, and admit that we are inclined to present God with our own sundry baubles in payment for our salvation. We bring our education, our culture, our refinements. We tell Him that we were educated in Adventist schools, and that we are not what we once were. We have become more tactful and kinder, we consistently try harder—and succeed—at being nicer to others. We have even made some progress with certain sins that we used to succumb to. We, very tactfully and humbly, call God’s attention to these facts, as if they contain some recommendation for us to Him.

They do not.

### **Not Even the Exercise of the Will**

Even the exercise of the will, which, as these other things, has its proper place, is powerless to save us (*Steps to Christ*, p. 18). Now, this is very interesting, because in the same book, she writes that the Christian must understand “the true force of the will” and that “Everything depends on the right action of the will” (*Steps to Christ*, p. 47). Does she contradict herself?

No, for in John 1:12, 13 we are told that to as many as receive Jesus, He gives power to become children of God. “Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” No one is renewed because of their DNA or ethnic background, or because a notable person might baptize them, or because even they themselves want to be “saved.” The only basis for our salvation is our renewal through the will of God.

This underlines a crucial point: We cannot change ourselves. It is impossible. It did not start out being impossible, but it became impossible. Before Adam's fall he could have formed a righteous character by obedience to God's law. That became an impossibility for him and for us (*Steps to Christ*, p. 62). "But pastor," someone is saying, "you are leaving us desolate! You are taking away our means of being saved!" I *am* laboring to pry from you any trust in yourself. The Word of God says that no one comes to the Father by any other means—any other—than Christ (John 14:6).

(The role of the will of the Christian is to make it possible for him to cooperate with God. While our will cannot be used to change us from sin to righteousness, to bring salvation itself to us, it is indispensable in making possible our continued growth in Christ. The will must be exercised; one must choose to become a Christian. But the will alone does not save us. We are given several faculties: intellect, volition (will), affective (emotional), faith, etc., and the whole person is involved in what we are and what we are becoming. Even the will and its use is only made possible by God. Its use is necessary but not sufficient in itself to save us. We must choose to be on God's side, but we can only do that because He restores liberty to us. Thus, we must affirm even more definitely: The will in itself cannot save us. The only way to the Father is Christ!)

### **The Peril of Outward Correctness of Behavior**

Hear now a grave danger:

They [education, culture, the exercise of the will, human effort] may produce an outward correctness of behavior, but they cannot change the heart; they cannot purify the springs of life (*Steps to Christ*, p. 18).

We are adept at fooling ourselves. This is a necessary process in order to justify the thought that we are “saved” while we hold back from giving some idol to God. It is an inevitable outcome of trying to keep both at the same time.

One looks for some sign of divine approval or merit with God. The most effective deception is one that you have good evidence for. We are already prone to live more by sight than faith (2 Corinthians 5:7). What better ploy then, by Satan, than to point us to an outward correctness of behavior in ourselves. Here is evidence—“unmistakable” evidence—that something is different.

Unfortunately, there need be no divine intervention to produce an outward correctness of behavior. Education is sufficient to; culture is sufficient to; the exercise of the will is sufficient to; and the employment of human effort is sufficient to produce this behavior.

Take it a step further. Satan might even help you produce outward correctness of behavior. If he can lead you to think yourself converted, he has led you to think that your heart is changed when it is not. In other words, in some cases it is to his advantage to cause you to improve your behavior. Nothing is more helpful to His cause than to provide to you a false sense of security. So we see how we can never look to our outward behavior as a sure signal that we are right with God. We are too quick to fool ourselves, and too quick to misinterpret in our own favor.

Right here we need to be careful. We hear with incessant regularity how we Adventists are trapped in “legalism.” Most often, this charge arises from a mistaken understanding of what the gospel is—an understanding on the part of the critic that is wrong to begin with. The Bible is our measure and not the community church down the street.

Nonetheless, we have heard the charge so frequently that we have become inoculated to it. Legalism is *not* the great dragon facing the church right now. But what Ellen White would call a “legal religion” *is* one of two errors in particular against which we are warned:

There are two errors against which the children of God—particularly those who have just come to trust in His grace—especially need to guard. The first, already dwelt upon, is that of looking to their own works, trusting to anything they can do, to bring themselves into harmony with God. He who is trying to become holy by his own works in keeping the law, is attempting an impossibility. All that man can do without Christ is polluted with selfishness and sin. It is the grace of Christ alone, through faith, that can make us holy. The opposite and no less dangerous error is that belief in Christ releases men from keeping the law of God; that since by faith alone we become partakers of the grace of Christ, our works have nothing to do with our redemption (*Steps to Christ*, pp. 59, 60).

Impossibility; that is what inspiration calls it when we trust in our own works. We cannot be saved by them; we cannot be made holy by them. Although we may have heard it so many times from misguided persons with misguided understanding, we cannot disregard the problem. It is a genuine error, dangerous to the core.

### **Necessity of a Power Working From Above**

If we have understood the previous lessons, then we may be ready at last to hear the bottom line: The person who would be saved must experience in himself a power working from within, a new life from above. Its source is outside himself. The person who would be a part of the kingdom must be changed from sin to holiness; that is, he must repudiate his commitment to self and instead establish his commitment to God. He must

Receive a new heart, new desires, purposes, and motives, leading to a new life (*Steps to Christ*, p. 18).

Ponder this, and realize: an unregenerate heart is not enough, old desires are not enough, old purposes, old motives, are not enough. Change must occur on all these fronts, and lead to a new life. This is not merely a new legal status; it is a wholesale change of a person. And even then, the new life will only be possible as the new heart, desires, purposes, motives are activated. Always the old habits will be ready to rise up and defeat the new man if he will let them. He must not. He need not. He now has an extraordinary power working in himself. That power is Christ.

### **Jacob's Ladder: We Do Not Climb**

One example of human need and divine intervention is the experience of Jacob (Genesis 25:21-34; 27). Having become involved in lying and misrepresentation, he was finally driven effectively into exile. Did he realize when he left home that he would never see his father or mother alive again? He felt supremely alone. Weary, he lay down to sleep. That is when God gave him a vision of hope. We often call it the vision of Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28).

And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the Lord stood above it, and said, I am the Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of (Genesis 28:12-15).

Later, in conversation with Nathaniel, Jesus referred to this same vision.

Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man (John 1:51).

The ladder that Jacob saw represented Christ. Now, when we see a ladder, somehow we immediately think that we must climb it. But we do not climb this ladder. No man is shown climbing this ladder. Jesus is the ladder.

The key thought is that the ladder is “set up on the earth” and the top of it reaches to heaven. The ladder is a link, a functional connection. Earth and heaven, severed by sin, are, in Christ, reconnected. Jesus bridges the chasm.

Who is seen climbing the ladder? Not men, but angels. Some are going up. Some are coming down. And what are angels? “Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation” (Hebrews 1:14).

Through Christ, God has bridged the gap.

Through Christ, earth is again linked with heaven. With His own merits, Christ has bridged the gulf which sin had made, so that the ministering angels can hold communion with man. Christ connects fallen man in his weakness and helplessness with the Source of infinite power (*Steps to Christ*, p. 20).

We had nothing to do with setting up this ladder. We did not even survey the ground and mark an “X” where God was to place the base of the ladder. He did it all. As soon as there was sin, there was a Savior; the ladder was already functional in Genesis 3. Jesus promised to be the ladder from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8).

There is only one offering that we can claim as truly our own, that we can bring to God. Because Jesus is given to us as a gift, we can bring Him. He is the offering that avails!

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the lessons offered today are some of the most important. Our race was radically changed by the Fall. We are prone to self-deception. A contractual, or legal basis for

salvation works against true liberation. We can only give to God that which He has given us.

Neither education, culture, human effort, nor exercise of the will can save us. To trust in outward correctness of behavior is to invite self-deception. There actually *is* a dangerous error of trusting in our own works. We need a power from outside of us to give us a new thoughts, motives, purposes.

We need Christ Himself. He is the ladder linking earth and heaven. We do not climb the ladder; we accept it. It is a gift. We are poor. We have nothing meritorious of our own to offer God, absolutely nothing at all. Jesus comes down to us and changes us from sin to holiness. We are all sinners by choice. It is to be hoped that not one soul in the hearing of this voice entertains any confusion on this point: You are a sinner. You need Christ. He is your salvation. Your pockets are empty. It is in this situation that you stand naked before the cross. Then there is very good news for you. This same Jesus, “Him hath God exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31). But we come to that next week.

**Biographical Note:** Pastor Larry Kirkpatrick is a convert to the Adventist faith. Since 1994 he has served in the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He holds degrees from Southern Adventist University and the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. His work has included research assistant for the Ellen G. White Estate, pioneering Adventist internet ministry, involvement in GYC, and presenter at the 50th Anniversary *Questions on Doctrine* Conference. He is author of the books *Real Grace for Real People* and *Cleanse and Close*. For many years his sermons and papers have been published on the internet. Larry and wife Pamela have served churches in Nevada, Utah, and California. The Kirkpatricks presently serve at the [Mentone church](#) near Loma Linda, California.