

Salvation

WHAT EVERY CATHOLIC SHOULD KNOW

Book Preview

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Michael Patrick Barber

Foreword by Brant Pitre

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To Kim

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FOREWORD

by Brant Pitre

Why did God become man? In other words, what was the *reason* for the Incarnation? If you had to answer this question with one word, what would you say?

Thankfully, if you're Catholic, you don't have to look far for the answer. You can simply turn to the words of the Nicene Creed, which sum up the essential points of the Christian faith. Every Sunday at Mass, Catholics throughout the world confess that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came down from heaven "for us men and *for our salvation*."

Obviously, if the Church requires Catholics to recite these Sunday after Sunday, they must be important. But what do they mean? What exactly is "salvation"?

Although I've been a Catholic all of my life, I must confess that I can count on one hand the number of homilies I remember that were focused on "salvation" or being "saved." For whatever reason, Catholics nowadays often just don't talk that way—even though Jesus himself declared that he came "to seek and *to save* the lost" (Luke 19:10). By contrast, when I was a teenager, my future wife, Elizabeth, was Southern Baptist, and I used to go to services with her on occasion. In her church, it seemed as if almost *every* sermon was about "being saved." Virtually every Sunday, the "gospel" of the forgiveness of sins through the death of Jesus Christ would

be proclaimed, and those who were not yet believers would be invited to come and receive the gift of “salvation.”

Now, there’s an old saying of Aristotle: “Nature abhors a vacuum.” As a Bible professor, I sometimes like to alter it slightly: “*Theology* abhors a vacuum.” What I mean by this is that whenever any aspect of the Catholic faith starts to be neglected, what remains in the minds and the hearts of ordinary Catholics is not just a “blank space.” Instead, errors that get picked up here and there along the way inevitably rush in to fill the void. The end result is people who have wrong ideas about what salvation is and how it works. Oftentimes, many Catholics (and I include myself in this) don’t even know that what they believe salvation is contradicts the Church’s teachings.

In his fantastic book, *Salvation: What Every Catholic Should Know*, Dr. Michael Barber takes the reader on a guided tour into the world of what theologians refer to as *soteriology*: the doctrine of “salvation” (Greek *sotēria*). The end result is a truly brilliant corrective to the many misunderstandings regarding salvation that have found their way into the minds and hearts of many Christians, including many Catholics. With writing that is both readable and charitable, Dr. Barber shows over and over again what salvation is *not*: it is not “self-help” (as in ancient Pelagianism and modern Therapeutic Deism); not mere “fire insurance” (as in Fundamentalism); not “without cost” (as in the “Health and Wealth Gospel” preached by certain televangelists); not just “personal” (as in Individualism); not just a “legal transaction,” a “spectator sport,” or simply a “moment” (as in some forms of Protestantism); it is not “inevitable” (as in Universalism); nor is it just about the future (as in some forms of Dispensationalism). Most important of all—and as we all need to be reminded on a regular basis—salvation is not just for “other people.” But that’s not all. Even more importantly, Barber shows us what the Bible says

salvation *is*. According to Scripture, salvation is returning to the Father; knowing the Lord; a revelation of divine love; an unmerited gift of righteousness that actually transforms us; a participation in the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and, above all, entering into the very life of the blessed Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. At every step, Barber makes a compelling case that this Catholic view of salvation is thoroughly and incontrovertibly *biblical*. While some discussions of salvation—especially the centuries-old debate between Protestants and Catholics over justification, faith, and works—can quickly veer off into technical philosophical and theological debates, this book makes an incredibly complex topic incredibly clear by keeping our eyes focused on what the Bible itself has to say about the subject.

In short, Dr. Barber has given us all a very precious gift: a book that shows both what Jesus Christ came into this world to save us *from* and, equally important, what he came to save us *for*.

Book Preview

INTRODUCTION

What Is Salvation?

For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith . . .

—Romans 1:16¹

Everything comes from love. All is ordained for the salvation of man. God does nothing without this goal in mind.

—St. Catherine of Siena,
cited in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §313²

Are you saved?

The first time someone asked me this question I was a teenager. The context of the conversation was a memorable one. My parents had taken me and my five siblings on a trip to Northern California as part of a family vacation. We piled into a van, left our home in Southern California, and spent hours on the road. The journey took us along a scenic route. We saw rugged mountains, shimmering lakes, and forested regions.

You might expect me to say that the remarkable vistas were the highlight of the trip. To be honest, I barely remember any of them. Instead, my clearest memory from that vacation was a brief exchange I had in the hotel lobby. I somehow ended up

1 Unless otherwise noted, all biblical translations are taken from the Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (RSV-CE). Throughout the book, emphases added to quotes are author's own.

2 St. Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue on Providence*, chapter IV, 138.

getting involved in a conversation about music with a group of kids my age. That is when things took an interesting turn.

Salvation: Past or Future?

We were all naming our favorite musical artists when someone mentioned a singer who is well known in the Christian music industry. No one in our group recognized the name—except for me. My father had always enjoyed contemporary Christian music, and so I was familiar with the genre. When I seconded the kid's endorsement, he was pleasantly surprised. He did not expect anyone to recognize the singer. It seemed like we had just connected on a new level. I suppose I should have seen what was coming next, but I did not.

The boy turned to me and asked, "Are you saved?"

I suddenly felt like a deer in the headlights. The question caught me completely off guard. Thankfully, at that precise moment some of the other members of the group interrupted, offering their own musical recommendations. Everyone else seemed uninterested in the matter of my salvation. Nevertheless, from the look on his face I could tell that the guy who had raised the issue was not going to drop the question. It was going to come back up.

As the others talked, I recall being slightly put off by his question. Was I *saved*? I assumed he was asking me if I was going to hell. "Look," I almost responded, "I am a good guy. I go to church regularly. Why would you even ask me that?"

But I also remember being perplexed. My thoughts ran something like this: "If salvation is about getting out of hell and going to heaven, shouldn't the question be, 'Do you think you *will* be saved?'"

I would later learn that my instincts were not entirely correct. While the New Testament does talk about salvation as a future event, it also describes it as something that has already occurred in the life of the believer. On the one hand, speaking of the day of judgment, Paul says believers "*will be saved*"

(1 Corinthians 3:15). On the other, the New Testament writers also indicate that salvation is an event that has already taken place in the life of the believer. For instance, in Titus 3:5 we are told that Christ “saved us . . . by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit.” Yet, as a young Catholic, I had never thought about salvation as involving an event that took place in the past.

When the discussion about music died down, I was put on the spot again—“Are you saved?” he asked a second time. With a hint of protest in my voice, I responded, “Of course!” He seemed pleased with my answer. But I was not.

I knew I had only told him what he wanted to hear. Our conversation ended, and we went our separate ways. Still, the question stuck with me. Long after we had returned from our trip, I was still thinking about it. In a certain sense, I do not think I have ever stopped thinking about it. This is the book I wish I had read prior to being asked, “Are you saved?” It is primarily written for Catholics, though it is my hope that non-Catholic Christians will profit from reading it as well.

Rethinking “Salvation”

I have discovered that many Catholics can relate to my experience. As Catholics we are very familiar with the language of “salvation.” We know it is important. In fact, at every Sunday Mass we proclaim our faith in Christ by affirming the Creed, which states, “*for our salvation* he came down from heaven.” We know that the Son of God became man *to save us*. We even call him the *Savior*.

As Catholics, we think we know what being saved means—until we are asked about it. Only then do many of us come to realize how little we have actually reflected on what salvation really involves. We even tend to substitute other phrases for “salvation.” When I told a Catholic friend that I was writing a book about salvation, his immediate reaction was: “Why

not just call it *How to Get to Heaven?*” I had to laugh. *That* is precisely my point. Rarely—if *ever!*—do we Catholics talk to another about being “saved.”

Indeed, to pious Catholic ears, it almost sounds “un-Catholic” to use the language of being “saved.” If a stranger were to show up in the parish hall after Sunday Mass and start talking about being “saved,” I suspect some parishioners might even wonder if he was a non-Catholic Christian who was just visiting the parish.

Yet why should Catholics be reticent about being *saved*? We call Jesus the *Savior*. If that matters to us, we should want to know what salvation really entails.

Furthermore, consider the following: if someone told you that they loved you and then added that they did not really care to know much about you, would you not start to wonder if that person’s love for you was truly genuine? Is this not, however, our attitude towards Jesus if we remain uninterested in the topic of salvation? How can we profess a belief in a *Savior*, but fail to care about what this means?

The truth is, my understanding of salvation as a Catholic teenager was woefully simplistic. That was a problem. And it was not just a problem because it left me ill-equipped to *explain* my faith. Being ignorant of the meaning of salvation meant that I did not know what *I* believed. And if we do not know what we believe as Catholics, how can we live our faith?

Salvation as Rethinking

This brings me to one of the important lessons I hope readers will take away from this book: bad theology always leads to difficulties in one’s spiritual life. This a truth that is necessary to underscore. Theology is essential for the Church’s pastoral mission and life of faith. Sadly, many fail to appreciate this. Theology is often viewed merely as a form of Catholic trivia. It is even becoming increasingly common to suggest that theology is somehow antithetical to spirituality or to pastoral concerns.

I once knew a priest who often expressed this idea in his homilies. “Don’t get distracted by all that fancy theology,” he would state in a charming, northeastern accent. “All that matters is that you have Jesus in your heart.”

Having Jesus in your heart *is* important; on that point, I fully agree. But it is not simply enough to love the Lord with all one’s heart. When Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment is, he responds, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, *and with all your mind.*” (Matthew 22:37).

Did you catch that? Loving the Lord with our *minds* is indispensable. One cannot be Jesus’s disciple and ignore this aspect of his teaching. In fact, the Greek word “disciple” (*mathētēs*) literally means “student.” As a professor, I like to remind my students what being a student involves—students must *study*. If we are called to be Jesus’s disciples, we are also called to grow constantly in understanding our faith.

Of course, I am *not* suggesting that every believer needs to earn academic degrees in theology. Most of the greatest saints in Church history never did. Nonetheless, you cannot be truly committed to following Jesus and refuse to think about what that entails. St. Paul writes, “. . . be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Romans 12:2). For Paul, spiritual transformation comes, in part, by being transformed in one’s *thinking*.

The Bible and Catholic Tradition

My principal aim in this book will be to unpack what the New Testament teaches about salvation in Christ. In this, I seek to follow the official teaching of the Second Vatican Council, which insists that “the soul of sacred theology” should be “the study of the sacred page,” that is, Scripture.³

3 Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* [“The Word of God”], §24.

While the arguments here are rooted in careful scholarship, I have kept the main text free of technical jargon. For those interested in the scholarly work that supports my explanations of Scripture, I have provided footnotes. These contain references to more technical pieces I have written as well as to works by other academics.⁴ But let me be clear: the notes are not necessary for the general reader. This is a book for *anyone* who wants to know what salvation in Christ means.

In reflecting on Scripture's teaching, we not only draw from the insights of contemporary scholars, but also wish to learn from the wisdom of the Church's tradition. To this end, I will frequently cite the fathers and doctors of the Church. In addition, I will have frequent recourse to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (which will simply be referred to as "the *Catechism*"). This work should not be confused with other "catechisms," such as the *Baltimore Catechism*. The *Catechism* is not written to be read by children. It was first published by Pope John Paul II and brings together Scripture's teaching with various witnesses of Catholic tradition. Since it was published, more recent popes—Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis—have continued to cite it as an official summary of Catholic teaching.⁵

G. K. Chesterton talked about the importance of tradition this way:

Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. . . . Democracy tells us not to

4 See, especially, the more detailed exegetical analysis found in Brant Pitre, Michael P. Barber, and John A. Kincaid, *Paul, A New Covenant Jew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019). In addition, see my contributions in Alan Stanley, ed., *Four Views on the Role of Works at the Final Judgment* with James D.G. Dunn et al (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

5 Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei* ["Door of Faith"], §11; Francis, Address to Participants in the Meeting Promoted by the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization (October 11, 2017).

neglect a good man's opinion . . . tradition asks us not to neglect a good man's opinion, even if he is our father.⁶

By reading Scripture in light of the Church's tradition, we recognize the way the Spirit has guided past generations in their meditation on Scripture. Tradition refuses to ignore their encounter with the Lord in the Bible.

Each chapter, then, will begin with two brief quotations. The first is taken from the Bible. This underscores that our whole discussion of salvation will be rooted in biblical teaching. The second quotation will come from the *Catechism*. This is not meant to imply that the *Catechism* is somehow on the same level as Scripture. Far from it! Rather, one of my goals throughout this book is to explain how the Catholic understanding of salvation flows from a thoughtful reading of the Bible that seeks to preserve its message.⁷

The Savior in the New Testament

Finally, let me offer two simple caveats upfront. First, in the Bible, God's saving work takes various forms. I cannot discuss all of them here. In this book we will be focusing in particular on *Jesus's* work of salvation. As a result, though we will also draw from the Old Testament, the New Testament will be emphasized in our discussion.

Second, this book is not intended to be a complete account of the New Testament's teaching about salvation. The treatment here is ordered towards a reflection on spirituality. Some New Testament books will receive little to no attention. Moreover, when I refer to "the New Testament's teaching" or use similar language, I do not mean to imply that all the inspired authors⁸

6 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane Company, 1908), 85.

7 Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, §10.

8 In this book I cannot discuss all the issues relating to the authorship of the various New Testament books. Here, following scholarly convention, I refer to them using their traditional titles without prejudice to such discussions.

speak of salvation in precisely the same way. Each of their presentations has distinctive nuances. That being said, there is substantial agreement among them on what salvation entails. It is not wrong, then, to speak in broad terms about an overall New Testament teaching about salvation.

In particular, the New Testament writers affirm that “salvation” comes through Christ. When Joseph is instructed in a dream to take Mary as his wife, he is also told what name to give the Messiah: “. . . *you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins*” (Matthew 1:21). “Jesus” is a translation of the Hebrew name “Yehoshua” (“Joshua”), which, as the *Catechism* explains, means “the LORD saves” (§430).⁹ To misunderstand salvation is to fail to understand fully who the Savior is. It is my hope that this book will give readers not only a better understanding of what salvation is, but a deeper love *for the Savior himself*.

With that in mind we now turn to our first chapter, which seeks to counter a common misconception about the nature of salvation, namely, that salvation is essentially about “self-help.”

⁹ See Ben F. Meyer, “Jesus,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:773.

Not Self-Help

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast.

—Ephesians 2:8–9

Our salvation flows from God’s initiative of love for us . . .

—*Catechism of the Catholic Church* §620

Walk into almost any bookstore these days and you will likely discover a section devoted to a relatively new, yet wildly popular, genre: “self-help.” Most of the books found in this aisle have one essential premise: the problems you struggle with can be solved if you follow the right advice. With the right motivation, personal resolve, and positive thinking, you can learn how to become “a better you.”

The Bible cannot be found in this section of the bookstore, and for good reason. The New Testament authors insist one cannot be saved by “self-help.” According to St. Paul—the man Church tradition refers to as “the Apostle”—doing the right thing is not merely difficult, but *impossible*: “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . I can will what is right, but *I cannot do it*. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Romans 7:15, 18–19).

There is also another reason why being saved cannot be realized through self-help. St. Paul goes on to say that salvation

is about much more than just becoming “a better you.” To be saved is to be united to God in Christ and to be “conformed to the image of his Son” (Romans 8:29).

If becoming like Christ sounds “difficult,” you are being too optimistic. If this sounds “challenging,” you are missing the point. Humanly speaking, what God calls us to is completely beyond our reach. It is truly *impossible*.

The good thing is, as Jesus reminds us, “What is impossible with men is possible with God” (Luke 18:27). God makes the impossible possible by his assistance. To make this point the New Testament authors use a critically important word: grace.

GRACE AS GOD’S MERCIFUL GIFT

Virtually all Christians affirm that grace is central to the Gospel message. Classic hymns like “Amazing Grace” celebrate grace’s vital role in the Christian life. But what does the word “grace” actually mean? As we shall see, the word is crucial for understanding the Gospel message.

Grace as a Gift

In the letter to the Ephesians we read: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8). It is no coincidence that grace is here spoken of as a “gift.” John Barclay, an Anglican New Testament scholar, has recently been doing groundbreaking scholarship, in which he analyzes the way Paul’s teaching about grace relates to gift-giving in the ancient world.¹ Here I will briefly explain some of his important insights.

1 See Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015). For a discussion of “grace” in the Johannine literature that interacts with Barclay’s contribution, see Francis J. Moloney, *Johannine Studies, 1975–2017* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 283–305.

The Greek word that is usually translated “grace” is *charis*. It is frequently used in Greek literature to refer to a “gift.” When Paul talks about “the grace [*charis*] of God” (Galatians 2:21), his meaning would have been fairly straightforward to his original Greek-speaking audiences—“the grace of God” meant “the gift of God.” Paul’s teaching about “grace” is, at its root, about God’s *gift* to humanity which is made available in Christ.

Gifts played a vital role in ancient society. They established, cemented, and defined relationships. Ancient gift-giving involved a complex system of etiquette. Those who received gifts understood that they were under a special obligation to reciprocate, that is, to make a return-gift. The ancient Roman author Seneca compares gift-giving to a game of catch, which requires a continuous back-and-forth exchange. As Barclay puts it, the goal was “to keep the ball (the gift) continually circulating back and forth.”²

The fact that gifts came with expectations could, of course, lead to difficulties. This was especially the case when gifts were exchanged between parties of different economic and social classes. To ensure that all things went smoothly, the two parties would often enter into delicate negotiations regarding how the recipient would reciprocate.

Because gift-giving was aimed at initiating a circle of reciprocity, rich benefactors had a responsibility to find worthy recipients. Financial gifts were only to be bestowed on those who would keep the circle of giving in motion. To give indiscriminately was viewed as foolish, even disreputable.

Ancient perspectives on gift-giving help us better understand Paul’s teaching about God’s grace. According to Paul, God is the perfect giver. The Father bestows on humanity the greatest gift possible, namely, his own Son. The “gift” is not just “power” or “favor” but *Christ himself*. In fact, Christ

2 See Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 46.

is also the giver for Paul, since he makes a gift of *himself*. In Galatians, we read, “*Grace* to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who *gave himself* for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age” (Galatians 1:3–4). The gift of God—*grace*—is here inseparable from Christ’s act of self-giving on the cross.

Yet, according to the Apostle, the divine gift made available in Christ is bestowed in a truly astonishing way: it is given to the *unworthy*. Paul writes: “While we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. . . . But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6, 8). Christians are saved by Christ’s act of life-giving love, which he offered *while we were still sinners*. Paul even says Christ died for us while we were God’s “enemies” (Romans 5:10).

The Apostle further stresses the generosity of God by saying, “. . . where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20). Therefore, instead of turning away from sinful humanity, God does just the opposite. The more humanity retreats from God, the more God comes after us.

Grace is given to those who are in sin. Our sin does not prevent the Lord from loving us.

Jesus’s Merciful Search for the Lost

Nonetheless, it is necessary to stress that, according to the Gospels, Jesus does not commend sinners *for their sins*. Jesus comes to bring repentance. Luke illustrates this point by telling us about an encounter Jesus had with a tax collector named Zacchaeus.

In Luke 19, Jesus enters the city of Jericho and Zacchaeus, a short man, is unable to catch a glimpse of him. To get a better view, Zacchaeus climbs up a sycamore tree. Jesus notices him there and, to the chagrin of the crowds, announces: “Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at

your house today” (Luke 19:5). This provokes scandal. Luke tells us, “. . . they all murmured, ‘He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner’” (Luke 19:7).

Tax collectors were Jews who had betrayed their own people. They were in league with the Romans, the pagan empire that had conquered Judea. Roman oppression was cruel and often involved horrific brutality. As one source explains, “The [Roman] army lived off the occupied country, pilfering its natural resources, enslaving members of its population, raping women and generally terrorizing the populace.”³

Jews who became tax collectors, therefore, were especially despised. They aligned themselves with the vile Romans, betrayed their own people, and did so for personal profit. They were also known for being dishonest. Jesus assumes their despised status in various places in the Gospels. For instance, in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus asks, “For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? *Do not even the tax collectors do the same?*” (Matthew 5:46).

Yet Jesus’s desire to dine with the man should not be interpreted as indicating that he took a permissive attitude towards sin. Rather, the overall narrative suggests that Jesus’s act is aimed at leading the tax collector to a genuine conversion. We go on to read:

And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold.” And Jesus said to him, “*Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost.*” (Luke 19:8–10)

3 W. J. Heard and K. Yamazaki-Ransom, “Revolutionary Movements,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Second Edition, eds. Jeannine K. Brown and Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 789.

Jesus dines with Zacchaeus as part of his stated mission: “to seek and save the lost.” Notice that Jesus is not simply the “Savior,” but that he also reveals himself as “Seeker.” He is actively searching for those in need of salvation. Jesus dines with Zacchaeus to change him.

Jesus succeeds in his mission. The tax collector pledges to make amends for his wrong doing. Saving the lost is not only about associating with them. Jesus’s announcement of salvation follows Zacchaeus’s pledge to set right the things he has done wrong. Salvation is not simply about confession, it also involves transformation and restitution.

Moreover, Zacchaeus plans to correct his wrongdoing in a remarkable way. Just as Jesus exceeds Zacchaeus’s expectations by coming to his house, Zacchaeus’s response likewise goes beyond what one might have anticipated from him. Not only does Zacchaeus promise to restore whatever he has stolen, he states that he will do so *fourfold*—he will give back four times whatever he has taken.

Jesus’s extravagant mercy, then, is aimed at producing prodigious repentance. This idea is expressed in another story in Luke’s Gospel: the account of a sinful woman who anoints Jesus.

He Who Is Forgiven Little, Loves Little

In Luke 7, Jesus is sitting at table in the house of a Pharisee named Simon. There he is approached by a woman who is a well-known sinner. Whatever it was that earned her this reputation, Simon is appalled by what Jesus permits her to do: she wets Jesus’s feet with her tears, washes them with her hair, and anoints him with expensive ointment. Simon thinks to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner” (Luke 7:39).

Jesus demonstrates that he is no ordinary man by revealing his awareness of Simon’s inner thoughts. Instead of responding

directly to Simon's objection, Jesus tells a parable involving a creditor who has two debtors. In the story, one debtor owes a creditor five hundred denarii, while another owes him fifty. In Jesus's day, a denarius represented the payment one would receive after a full day's worth of work in the fields. From the standpoint of those in first-century Galilee, the first man's debt looks insoluble, yet even the second debtor owes a significant sum. Both, however, are shown mercy and their debts are forgiven. Jesus asks Simon which of the two debtors will love the creditor more (Luke 7:42). Simon replies, "The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more" (Luke 7:43). Jesus commends him, "You have judged rightly." (Luke 7:43).

Having secured this answer, Jesus indicates that the parable was actually about the sinful woman. He concludes by saying to Simon, "I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little." (Luke 7:47). Repentance, then, is linked with *love*. The more honest we are in recognizing our sin, the more we will have to ask to be forgiven. And the more we are forgiven by the Lord, the more we will love him.

SAVING FAITH AS A GIFT

In all of this, Jesus underscores that salvation is the result of God's mercy. This is revealed when we look more carefully at the story of the sinful woman. The story highlights a key theme found elsewhere in the New Testament: even our response to the Lord is a result of his grace.

"Your Faith Has Saved You"

The Parable of the Two Creditors is meant to explain the reason the woman performed the act of anointing Jesus; she shows great love because she has been forgiven much. At the

end of the scene, Jesus dismisses her by saying, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Luke 7:50). Two dimensions of the episode are important to highlight.

First, it does not seem that the woman suddenly received the gift of faith *because* she anointed Jesus. She anoints him as an expression of her faith. In light of the parable, she is like the debtor who owed much. Her acts are signs of love carried out in *response* to the great mercy that has already been shown to her.⁴

Second, Jesus says she has received *salvation* because of her faith: “Your faith has *saved* you.” We will have more to say about the word translated as “faith” (Greek *pistis*) later. For now, it is enough to point out that one dimension of the term translated “faith” is “trust.” Later, Luke tells us the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, which is addressed to those who “trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others” (Luke 18:9). The story teaches that salvation is found in putting faith in the Lord, which means not relying on one’s *own* self-generated righteousness. Faith is first and foremost trusting in the Lord’s gift of salvation.

Jesus’s message here anticipates what we learn later in Ephesians, namely, “by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9). Grace is a “gift” because “it is not your own doing.” First and foremost, then, we are not saved by our own actions, but by God’s gift and initiative.

To some this might sound “un-Catholic.” A common caricature of Catholic teaching is that it rejects the notion of salvation by grace and affirms instead that salvation is simply by works. Nothing could be further from the truth. The *Catechism*

⁴ Though see the fuller treatment in Anthony Giambrone, *Sacramental Charity, Creditor Christology, and the Economy of Salvation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 109–18.

maintains, “Grace is *favor*, the *free and undeserved help* that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God” (§1996). It goes on to affirm, “Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, *no one can merit the initial grace* of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion” (§2010). Our good works do have saving value (more on that later), but God’s gift of grace is not first given to us because we somehow earn it. God gives the gift of faith *to the unworthy*.

Faith as the Work of God

In different ways, the New Testament makes the point that faith is the result of God’s work. For example, Paul tells the Corinthians, “. . . no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3). The Apostle does not mean that a non-believer is unable to pronounce the words “Jesus is Lord.” Rather, his point is that without divine assistance no one can say that “Jesus is Lord” *and mean it*.

Similarly, in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus says, “This is *the work of God*, that you *believe* in him whom he has sent” (John 6:29). Those who believe cannot simply attribute their faith to their own insight. Jesus insists, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44).

Matthew’s account of Peter’s famous confession of faith also emphasizes this truth. After questioning the disciples on what people are saying about him, Jesus puts them on the spot, asking, “But who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15). Peter responds, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). Jesus then explains: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven” (Matthew 16:17). Jesus assures him that he did not come to the truth because of his own ingenuity or brilliance. Peter’s faith has only been made possible by the Father—it is not of “flesh” and “blood,” that is, the result of his human powers of perception.

RETURNING TO THE FATHER

God wants us to be forgiven more than we ourselves want to be forgiven. Yet a major obstacle to this often remains: we fail to believe this to be true. Rather than seeing God as a merciful father, we come to view the Lord as an authoritarian figure who withholds love unless we can earn it. The Bible reveals that this perspective is itself due to sin. Jesus illustrates this in one of his most famous parables, the story often referred to as the Parable of the “Prodigal Son.”⁵

Forgetting God’s Fatherhood

The Parable of the Prodigal Son begins with an account of a father who has two sons. The younger son asks for his inheritance. Having received it from his father, this son leaves home and squanders all he has on loose living. Eventually, the son hits rock bottom. Jesus explains,

And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, “How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.’” (Luke 15:14–19)

Let us focus our attention on a few of the key details here.

First, note that the story moves from sonship to servitude. The young man goes from being the son of a man who had

⁵ For a discussion of debated issues relating to the parable, see Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 117–43.

“hired servants” to becoming a servant himself. He realizes that those who have the lowest positions in his father’s house are better off than he is.

Second, we are told that “no one gave him anything.” This stands in stark contrast to his father, who gave to him freely and liberally. In the original Greek, the father is said to have divided his “life” (Greek *bios*) between his two sons (Luke 15:12). By leaving with his share of his father’s goods, the son shirked any responsibility he might one day have to care for his father. The son thinks only of himself. By contrast, the father gave no thought to himself but only to his son.

Third, having lost everything, the young man “came to himself,” that is, he came to his senses. In the wider context of Luke 15, Jesus tells two other parables—the lost sheep (Luke 15:4–7) and the lost coin (Luke 15:8–10)—which both illustrate genuine repentance. When Jesus says that the wayward son “came to himself,” the point is that the prodigal likewise repents.

Finally, note that the young man despairs of being called his father’s son. He resolves to go back and ask to be taken in as merely a servant. His sin causes him to believe that his father could no longer love him as his son. This proves incorrect.

The Forgiving Father

The scene of the son’s return home is charged with emotion: Jesus explains, “But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). The son begins the speech he has prepared, saying, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son” (Luke 15:21), but before he can finish everything he planned to say—he never gets to the line “treat me as one of your hired servants”—his father exclaims,

Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill

it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. (Luke 15:22–24)

The father takes the initiative in welcoming his son home. Even before the son can express contrition, his father is already running to embrace him.

The story then shifts to the other son who refuses to join the welcome party. He complains to his father:

Lo, these many years I have served you, and I *never disobeyed your command*; yet you never *gave me a kid*, that I might *make merry with my friends*. But when this *son of yours* came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf! (Luke 15:29–30)

The older son's words are revealing. He refuses to identify the younger son as his brother, referring to him instead as "this son of yours." Likewise, he never calls his dad "father." In short, now it is the older son who appears cut off from the family. Instead of relating to his father as a son, the older brother portrays himself as a servant: ". . . these many years I have *served you*, and I *never disobeyed your command*." He may have never left home, but, like the younger son, he abandons his sonship for slavery. The disgruntled brother does not want to feast with his family but instead only desires to "make merry with my friends."

Through it all the father never ceases to identify himself as the older son's father: "*Son*, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your *brother* was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:31–32). The father was eager to reconcile with his younger son, who once abandoned him. Now he reaches out in love to his other son. He reminds his son that he always has a place in the father's house. Although the elder son fails to identify himself as a member of the family, the father never stops calling him "son."

As with other parables, the “father” in the story is best seen as an image of God. The story therefore underscores God’s unrelenting love for us. According to Scripture, it is only because of sin that we begin to doubt this—sin causes us to forget that God loves us. Instead of remembering God’s goodness, we perceive the Lord as hostile or distant to us. Rather than seeing God as our Father we begin to view the Lord as merely our judge.

Yet, while sin encourages us to reduce salvation to a legal matter, the New Testament reminds us that being saved is more than merely escaping divine judgment. If we fail to appreciate this, we will reduce our spiritual life to nothing more than being God’s servant and “obeying” God’s commandments.

The judge is our Father who never abandons us to ourselves. Without the Lord’s help we could never be “saved.” What God calls us to is beyond anything we could ever attain on our own. But he gives us the “gift” of his help—he gives us grace. He does this because first and foremost he is not simply lawgiver, but Father. This is why we read: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9). God takes the initiative to save us by his gift.

Indeed, the reason people often neglect the significance of grace is that they fail to fully understand what the goal of salvation is. Contrary to the way many speak, salvation entails much more than merely avoiding the fires of damnation. In the next chapter, then, we will take on this minimalistic view of salvation, which I like to refer to as the “salvation as fire insurance” view.