

## “Serves You Right”

### Sermon – June 21, 2026 Stone Presbyterian Church

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Salvation. That seems to be an important thing to most Christians. For example, many groups, especially evangelicals, really emphasize “being saved.” But what does it mean and how do you get it?

Prior to the Reformation, the Church taught that salvation was a gift from God made possible through the Church’s sacraments, works, and the intercession of the saints. This was a sacramental and works-based system that emphasized both divine grace and human cooperation.

Among other things, this led to the use of indulgences, which was a special permission from the Church that could reduce the punishment for sins, particularly in the hereafter.

By the late Middle Ages, indulgences were sold for money and used to support charities for the public good, including hospitals. But by Martin Luther’s time in the 16 century, they were being abused so badly that it led to his 95 Theses and the Protestant Reformation.

Luther was motivated by Romans 3:28, “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.” He picked up that and emphasized justification comes through faith alone, not by human works or merit.

Justification is churchy word and it is about your status before God — the verdict of not guilty. Paul teaches that justification is a one-time legal declaration by God that a sinner is righteous on the basis of faith in Christ, freeing us from the penalty of sin. It is only by God’s grace through faith that we are justified, made right.

John Calvin echoed this saying, “No one can be justified by the law; justification is through faith alone.”

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For many people this was liberating. This meant they didn't have to pay for indulgences to be saved or to save a loved one.

It did lead, though, to potential abuse from the other end. Johannes Agricola, initially a follower and friend of Martin Luther, became an antagonist when he began teaching Christians were entirely free from the Mosaic law, being under the gospel alone.

Luther derisively called this “antinomianism”, literally “against the law.” And you can see how some considered this to be a “license to sin” and that future sins did not require repentance.

In Geneva, John Calvin faced a related challenge by a faction led by Ami Perrin who promoted ignoring or spurning accepted morals and valued physical pleasures. Calvin pejoratively used the term “libertine”—free thinker—to negatively describe these opponents of his policies.

Since those times, all Christian denominations struggle with how do morals and works factor in being a Christian.

You probably have faced this in your own lives, particularly with non-believers who say, “Well, I guess there's nothing to keep me from continuing living my life of debauchery and then on my deathbed say, ‘I believe in Jesus’ and I'll go to heaven.”

Maybe they would; not for me to say.

In Romans 5 Paul says that God's grace in Jesus Christ is the answer to human sin. No matter how great the transgression, God's grace in Christ is abundantly greater.

But then Paul begins to worry that his audience might think, “If sin is the occasion for grace, perhaps we should just keep on sinning so that God might go on showing us God's grace.” Imagine the Prodigal Son coming

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home from the far country and discovering not only forgiveness but a feast. What if six months later he decides, “That worked so well, I’ll just head for the far country again. After all, the greater the sin, the greater the grace.”

Today’s lectionary passage from the beginning of Romans 6 answers that question saying, “What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?”

He goes on to say we have been baptized into Christ and his death, so have been united with him in a resurrection like his.

Beyond today’s passage, Paul says in verse 19 “present your members as slaves to righteousness, leading to sanctification.”

Sanctification is about the process of transformation that happens within you once you accept that only God can give you that justification and that you cannot achieve it yourself.

Thus, sanctification is the ongoing process of being transformed into Christ’s likeness through obedience, spiritual growth, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Paul is telling the Romans who got baptized, they came out of the water as changed people. Like Jesus, they had gone from death to life. In this new life, they celebrate Jesus’ conquest of death so that we may have eternal life. They also celebrate Jesus’ conquest of sin, so they will live true and holy lives right now. It was not a one-and-done.

For Paul the idea of a sinful baptized person is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. “You are dead to sin,” says Paul, “so stop acting as if you were capable of sin. Be who you are—a follower of Christ.”

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Thus, not only our lives, but our minds and spirits are transformed to try and imitate Jesus as we are now united with him.

We do this not so much as to avoid damnation, but so that we might live joyful lives. The person who lives a life like the Prodigal Son planning to repent at the end misses the point. Life in Christ is not drudgery, something to endure until we die. Life in Christ frees us to live the way we were made to live — with open hands, unburdened hearts, and love that actually costs something.

And that love means love as an action verb: feed the hungry, support the weak, help the afflicted. To say, “I accept Jesus Christ as my savior” is to say, “I will imitate Christ in all that I do and say.”

Belief then is expressed through actions. Good works do not earn your way into heaven, but if you believe, you will do good works as a manifestation of that belief. And logically, the contrapositive is true, if you don't do good works, then you don't believe.

As anti-Nazi theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “The only man who has the right to say that he is justified by grace alone is the man who has left all to follow Christ.”

And that is what Jesus reminds us in today's gospel lesson from Matthew 10. As he says in verse 38, “whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” And that is not for the faint of heart. For in Jesus' time it was his fellow Judeans, particularly the rich and powerful, who were threatened by his message of peace, of helping the poor, the sick, the marginalized.

In our time we face fellow Christians who seek to preserve power through the state and oppress those oppose them. As “Pastor Brandon” on

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Facebook says, “Christianity thrives when it challenges empire. It becomes corrupted when it tries to become one.”

Yet, as we struggle against them, Jesus tells us in verse 26, “have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.” And in verse 31 tells us, “Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

Thus, we stand up to racism, nativism, and cruelty, knowing there may be a cost, but also knowing that God is with those seek to be Christ-like.

Because God justifies you—serves you right—go and lose your life for Christ’s sake and you will find it. That’s salvation.

In the name of God the Creator; God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.  
Amen.