

WORSHIP

Sermon | 11.4.2018



Once for All

By the Reverend Chuck Williamson

Psalm 146

Hebrews 9:11-14

Not long ago one of my preacher friends was talking to one of his parishioners. His church member was in bad health and knew that she was nearing the end of her life. In the course of the conversation, she said to my friend, “I’m not sure I’ve done enough good things to get to go to heaven. I’m not sure I’m good enough.”

If we’re honest, there are probably a lot of people who feel that way. Perhaps many in this room feel that way. What about it: have we done enough good things to get to go to heaven? We do a lot of good things:

- we pay our pledge to the church;
- we volunteer at Loaves and Fishes;
- we help build a Habitat house;
- we spend the night at Room in the Inn;
- we show up for church.

We do lot of good things. But is it enough? Have we done enough good things to get to go to heaven?

My father, who was a Presbyterian minister, told me that in one church he served, every year around Christmas time, a member would come to him and hand him a sizeable check made out to the church. After doing this for several years, one Christmas the man asked my father, “Do you know why I do this every year? I do it so I will get to go to heaven.”



Is that the way it works? Is that why we do these good things—so we will get into heaven when we die?

There are certainly a lot of people who would tell you that that is the way it works—that if you want to go to heaven when you die, then you have to do good works while you're alive. You have to earn your way there.

It's understandable how we would come to this conclusion, because that's the way things work in other areas of life.

At school you get a report card, letting you know how well you have done... or not done. When I was in first grade, our teacher divided us up into reading groups according to how well we could read. There were the red birds; they were the best readers. Then the blue birds. I was a crow. I was always the caboose on the reading train. Maybe if I had worked at it a little harder I could have moved up. But mainly all it did was to reinforce what I poor reader I was.

But such is life. You're constantly being judged on your performance. Luke Kuechly does not get to play for the Panthers because he's a nice guy—which it appears that he is. He gets to play because he's worked hard, studied hard, trained hard and become the best middle linebacker in the NFL. It's the payoff for his hard work. He's there because he's earned it and deserves it.

It's a lesson that we learn early in life: if you're going to succeed at something, it's all up to you. That's the way life works.

And since that principle is so prevalent in every other area of life, it's no wonder that we would also assume that it must be the way things work in our relationship to God. It's all up to us.

That's the way it was for Martin Luther. As a young man, Luther's search for a relationship with God led him to a monastery where he became a model monk. Looking back on that time in his life, Luther wrote:

I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I would have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading and other work.



There were times when Luther was proud of his virtue and good works, and would say, “I have done nothing wrong today.” But then misgivings would arise: “Have I fasted enough? Am I poor enough?” (Bainton, *Here I Stand*, p. 45)

Up to that point in his life Luther believed that the path to a relationship with God was through good works.

In that period leading up to the Reformation, in which Martin Luther played such an important part, it was widely accepted that you had to do a certain number of good works if you wanted to get into heaven. Then there were those saints who did way more good deeds than they themselves needed to get to heaven, and the church taught that those excess good deeds that the saints had done would be accumulated in a storehouse of merit. So that if you happened to be a few good deeds short of what you needed to get to heaven, you could make a withdrawal from that storehouse of merit to make up for the shortfall. That idea eventually turned into an ingenious fund raising plan. There were agents of the church who traveled from place to place selling indulgences. If you weren't quite sure that your grandmother had done enough good deeds to get herself into heaven, then for a modest fee, you could buy an indulgence to acquire a few of the extra good deeds of the saints and thus make sure Grandma got in.

Although this selling indulgences idea went too far, it was built on the long-accepted idea that you get into heaven by good works, either your own or the good works of others.

Actually this idea is nothing new. You can see it from the earliest chapters of the Bible. You know the story of the Tower of Babel—how the people of Babel built a tower to try to get up to the heavens. They figured that if they were going to get up to God, it would have to be by their own efforts. So they went at it...they started building a tower.

Though the pages of the Old Testament you can find some 613 various laws—things that you were supposed to do and not do if you wanted to be in favor with God. There were, of course, the well-known laws, like the Ten Commandments. But there were also many less well-known laws that dictated things like what you could eat and not eat, and how to prepare your food, and



what fabrics you could use to make your clothes. And underlying these 613 laws was the idea that if you wanted to achieve favor with God, this was the way you did it. You did it by keeping all these laws, because—as you all know—it’s all up to you.

That’s the way it is in other areas of life, so that must be the way it is in our relationship with God.

And that is exactly what is going on in this passage from Hebrews that we read. The writer of Hebrews paints a picture of the priest entering into the sanctuary preparing to offer the sacrifice that was required by law. Our scripture says that he enters the holy place with “the blood of goats and calves.” He’s doing what the law requires, but is it really accomplishing anything?

Later on in Hebrews, the writer describes it like this, “Every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins” (Heb. 10:11).

But Jesus... I have a friend who says that every time you hear that phrase “But Jesus” or “But God”, get ready because you are about to experience God’s grace.

But Jesus “entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood.... Christ offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins.” And because of this perfect—once for all—sacrifice made by Jesus, God says, “I will remember their sins no more.”

Every time we baptize a child, we are affirming that God’s love is at work in that child. It’s not that the child has done something to be worthy of God’s love. God is not sitting up in heaven waiting for that child to show that he or she deserves God’s love. No. Before the child ever knows the first thing about love, God is already loving that child. Before any of us ever knows the first thing about success or failure, reward or punishment, making the team or getting cut...before any of that, God has already declared that we are children of God, loved by God. And there is nothing we can do that will make God stop loving us.

These saints of the church that we are remembering today on this All Saints Day, are not super Christians who have piled up enough good deeds to get into



heaven. Oh, they have done many good deeds and have put their faith to work in their lives. But that's not why they are saints. In fact, they are sinners just like you and I. But they are sinners, loved by God, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. And that's what makes them saints.

That's what we will celebrate when we come to the table in a few minutes. We will remember the once for all perfect sacrifice made by Christ, through whom we are saved.

