

7.7.2024 Trinity 6 (*What must I do to be saved?*)

Billy Graham once told a story about a time in a small town when he asked a little boy how to get to the post office. After the child pointed him in the right direction, Graham invited him to come to the Crusade that evening to hear him share the Gospel. He said to the boy, “You can come hear me telling everyone about how to get to heaven.” The child looked at him, shook his head and replied, “I don’t think I’ll be there. You don’t even know your way to the post office.”

The Reverend Billy Graham may not have known how to get to the post office in that small town, but he was a man who dedicated his life to preaching the Gospel - boldly proclaiming the redemptive love of God for all mankind, and over the years, the more than 214 million people who attended his crusades heard him telling everyone about how to get to heaven. Billy Graham knew *the Way* (John 14:6), and the question I would ask you to consider today is this: If someone were to ask you, how do I get to heaven, would you be able to point them in the right direction?

How do we get there from here, or in other words, “*What must I do to be saved?*” This is actually the question that the Bible records a Philippian Jailer asking Paul and Silas. In Acts we read about these two saints being wrongly imprisoned, and at about midnight, they were “*praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s bonds were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family*” (Acts 16:25-33).

How do we get to heaven from here? In this historical record of early Church history, we learn that the general formula for Salvation is repentance, belief, and baptism. We find this pattern in the account of Paul, Silas, and the Philippian Jailer, and we see the same pattern, again in the book of Acts, immediately after Peter preached on the day of Pentecost. In that passage we read about the way Peter proclaimed the Gospel, and that many in the crowd that day were *“cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’ And Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit...’ So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers”* (Acts 2:37-39, 41-42). The people who were *“cut to the heart,”* those who were, by the grace of God, awakened by the preaching of St. Peter, were told to *“repent and be baptized,”* and Scripture tells us that *“those who received his word,”* those who believed with their heart, *“were baptized,”* and on that day the number of Christians grew from 120 to 3,120.

The Philippian Jailer asked Paul and Silas, *“What must I do to be saved?”* The crowd asked Peter and the apostles, *“Brothers, what shall we do?”* and in these examples, from the ministry of saints Peter and Paul, we see that God brings souls into His Church, He guides us to Him, He directs us toward heaven, through repentance, belief, and baptism. In the passages we considered, these actions occurred in a single day, but I wonder, as we consider the question of how do we get to heaven from here, could repentance, belief, and baptism not only be an initial pattern for Salvation, but also a formula for living the Christian life, a means not only of Salvation, but of Sanctification - the process by which God makes us holy through an ongoing, ever-growing, intimate relationship with Him.

First, let’s consider repentance. Repentance is a sincere willingness to radically change our behavior, to not only accept Jesus as our Savior, but to humbly submit to Him as our Lord. In the example of the Philippian Jailer and the crowd at Pentecost, we see signs of repentance as the Jailer, *trembling with fear fell down before Paul and Silas,* and the crowd being *cut to the heart* asked, *“Brothers, what shall we do?”* (Acts 2:37), but repentance

is not only a vital part of our initial response to the Gospel, it's also a daily part of the Christian life. In Morning and Evening Prayer, on a daily basis, we acknowledge that "we have erred and strayed" from God's ways like lost sheep, that "we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts," and in this humble confession we ask God to spare us, restore us, and grant that we may, by His grace, "hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life," to the glory of His Holy Name.

We repent daily in private prayer, and we repent weekly in corporate prayer. In the liturgy for Holy Communion, the invitation to receive our Lord's Body and Blood is given to those "who do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in His holy ways..." Those who receive this invitation then "earnestly repent," declaring the truth that we are "heartily sorry for these our misdoings." We ask for our Father's mercy, forgiveness, and grace that we may "ever hereafter serve and please thee in newness of life," to the honor and glory of His Holy Name.

When John the Baptist began to preach in the wilderness of Judea, He cried out, "*Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (Matthew 3:2). When Jesus began His public ministry, He used the same words, "*Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (Matthew 4:17). The answer to the question of how do we get to heaven from here clearly begins with repentance, and as we've seen in examples of our liturgical prayers, repentance is also a daily part of the Christian life. Repentance is a continual step on the path to heaven, and so is belief.

Paul and Silas said to the Philippian Jailer, "*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.*" The Greek word in that verse translated to "believe" means to put one's faith in, to trust, and this word comes with the implication that actions based on that belief will follow. Therefore, to *believe in the Lord Jesus*, is to trust Him, to place your faith in Him - and act on it! Action must accompany belief, faith must work through love, or we're just like the demons described in the Bible as those who "*believe, and tremble*" (James 2:19). The faith of a demon is useless because it bears no good fruit, it is faith without love, and our faith, if it is not

working through love, is also useless. St. Paul described such faith a letter to the Corinthians. It was there that he wrote, *“And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing”* (1 Corinthians 13:2). Faith without love profits us nothing, because from a biblical perspective, it’s impossible to have true faith without love, for true, saving faith unites us to Christ, Who is Love (1 John 4:8). *Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.* To believe in Jesus is not to know of Him, but to know Him intimately, to trust Him completely, and to *“work out”* (Philippians 2:12) our Salvation through Love - love for God, and love for the world He gave the life of His Son to save.

We’ve talked about repentance and belief, now let’s consider baptism. Holy Baptism, as we read in the Prayer Book Catechism, is the Sacrament by which we are made a member of the Body of Christ, a child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven (BCP pg. 577). Baptism is the door through which we enter the Church, and begin to experience the grace that flows from hearing the Word of God and receiving the Sacraments that our Lord instituted. Therefore, in baptism, we recognize not only a beginning, but as adopted sons and daughters of God, an ongoing relationship with our Father, who loves us, protects us, provides for us, and nourishes our souls by speaking to His children in His house, and feeding us at His table.

Peter said to the crowd, *“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit...”* Baptism marks the beginning, and *the gift* given in Baptism is the Holy Spirit, given to the people of God be our continual Helper, Comforter, and Guide throughout this journey. The Holy Spirit is the One who lives in us, who takes up residence in our hearts, souls, and minds. The Spirit is the One who, by the grace of God, provides spiritual gifts to the end that we may function as the Body of Christ, that we may express faith, which working through love, bears the fruits of the Spirit in our lives - *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control* (Galatians 5:22-23).

How do we get to heaven from here? We repent - we turn away from ourselves and toward God. We believe - we place our faith in the Lord and

act on it through love for God and neighbor. We are baptized - we are made children of God, inheritors of the kingdom of heaven, and we receive in baptism the gift of God Himself, His Holy Spirit living in us. Such intimate union with God is, in a very real sense, the gift of heaven. This is how we get there from here, and by the grace of God may we model repentance, belief, and baptism in such a manner that the world can't help but recognize, and be led to the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6).