

I Can't, But God Can

M. W. Bassford, 2-2-14

Believe it or not, a few days ago, I ran across an argument on the Internet. It concerned 1 Timothy 1:15. The men involved were arguing about whether Paul was referring to himself as a sinner in the present tense, or whether he considered himself a sinner in the past tense who now was something different. The point is debatable, and I'm not going to try to solve the dilemma this morning.

However, in the New Testament in the NASB, the word "sinner" or "sinners" is used 42 other times, and in every one of those 42 uses, it unquestionably refers to people who are not right with God. By contrast, variants of the word "saint" appear 60 times in the New Testament, always referring to people who belong to God. And yet, it is much more common to hear Christians say in prayer or during Bible class, "I'm a sinner" than "I'm a saint", even though that's the opposite of the way the words are used in Scripture.

Something strange is going on here. Why do we, who are so committed to the pattern of the Bible, refer to ourselves in a way that is the opposite of the pattern that the Bible reveals? I myself used to do it all the time, and I probably would do it still if I didn't catch myself. If asked, I think most of us would explain ourselves by referring to our own sinfulness and our desire to be humble. However, I believe there's more going on than that. Let me elaborate this morning as we consider what we can't do, but God can.

The Work of Christ

Our analysis of this topic must begin with an exploration of the work of Christ. There are, of course, many passages that discuss the mighty deeds of Jesus, but one that suits our purposes particularly well this morning is found in the middle section of Colossians 2. This will help us to prepare for the Lord's Supper.

The first section of this text discusses the danger of **CAPTIVITY TO THE WORLD**. Let's look together at Colossians 2:8-10. In some ways, the heading I chose for this section is misleading. When we think of being taken captive by the world, we think of being led astray by various fleshly lusts, and there are indeed passages that use that language. However, that's not Paul's target here. Instead, he identifies as the problem philosophy, empty deception, and the traditions of men.

Here's what's going on. At the time of Paul's writing, the saints in Colossae were under attack from all directions. They had to deal with the usual plague of Judaizing false teachers, who insisted that converts from the Gentiles had to be circumcised and obey all the customs of the law of Moses.

However, it's evident from Paul's words that a different kind of false teacher was on the prowl too. These men were the predecessors of the group that would be known as the Gnostics. They emphasized two things. First of all, they claimed to possess special, secret wisdom that was not available to most Christians. Second, they regarded the material world as inherently evil and so urged Christians to pursue a course of extreme asceticism. Those who believed them rejected even many of the good things that God created.

Both of these groups claimed to be seeking righteousness, not sin, yet both of them had a fleshly focus. The Judaizers emphasized the fleshly requirements of the law, and the proto-Gnostics emphasized extreme self-denial as a means of demonstrating spiritual merit. They focused on the self, not the Lord.

Paul's solution to both of these problems was a simple return to Christ. The Colossians needed to remember who Jesus was and what He had done for them. Jesus wasn't some minor figure that the righteous needed to acknowledge on their road to greater enlightenment. Instead, He was the end of that road. Somehow, when Jesus came to earth, the power and the majesty of God were crammed into a human body.

Because Jesus is nothing less than fully God, there is nothing He couldn't do for the Colossians, and there is nothing He can't do for us. The Colossians didn't have to complete their obedience to God by being circumcised. Christ had already completed them. They didn't have to search for spiritual mysteries, because in Jesus, they already knew the ruler over everything. They shouldn't listen to the ascetic wisdom of human philosophers because Jesus possessed all authority. Jesus was the end of the Colossians' search, and of ours.

Next, Paul explores the significance of the Colossians' **BURIAL IN BAPTISM**. Consider with me Colossians 2:11-12. Before we talk about what this text means, though, let's talk about what it doesn't mean. Believe it or not, this is one of the primary texts that is used to defend the practice of infant baptism. Here's how the argument runs: This text says that baptism under the law of Christ is equivalent to circumcision

under the Law of Moses. From the time of Abraham on, his male descendants were supposed to be circumcised on their eighth day of life. Because babies were circumcised under the Law of Moses, then babies should be baptized under the law of Christ. Makes sense, right?

Before we install a baptismal font next to the Lord's Supper table, though, there are some things here that we must consider. First, Paul describes this baptism as a burial, an immersion in dirt. Of course, all who practice infant baptism invariably sprinkle rather than immerse. If you try to immerse a baby, the poor thing's going to drown! Second, the text tells us that those who are baptized are then raised up through faith in God. Baptism, then, only gives new life to those who believe, which an infant cannot do. Despite the superficial appeal of the analogy to circumcision, we are compelled to dismiss this argument.

Instead, what Paul is saying is that the Colossians, who were under such pressure to accept circumcision, had already received the circumcision that mattered when they chose to be baptized. When they went down into the waters of baptism, they left their fleshly man in those waters just like the body of Christ had been left in His tomb. Then, when they were drawn up out of the water, they were raised to new life just like Jesus had been raised from the dead by the power of God. As for them, so for us. If we have chosen to be baptized, we can be confident that we have been raised to new life too.

Of course, the new life that Christians receive is a spiritual life, a life in which they know **FORGIVENESS OF SINS**. Paul points this out in Colossians 2:13-14. First, he makes explicit something that was implicit in his earlier argument. Before we are baptized for the forgiveness of our sins, we are dead, and those sins were the cause of our death. It's a terrible thing to be a sinner, because being a sinner means that you're headed to eternal death in hell. The Colossians didn't even have the shred of hope that being part of the Jewish people offered.

However, Christ did two things for them. First, when they were baptized, He forgave them of those sins, setting their feet not on the road to death, but the road to eternal life. Second, Jesus nailed the decrees that were hostile to them, the Law of Moses itself, to the cross. This was important to the Colossians because it meant that the Judaizing teachers were wrong. The entirety of the Law died with Jesus, so they were no longer subject to it. The same thing is true for us today. 2000 years later, we are still free from the Law. We are not subject to its commandments, but we can't use it to justify our behavior, either. So, for instance, when other churches attempt to justify their use of instrumental music by pointing to the instrument in the Psalms, they are trying to authorize their behavior with a dead letter. That doesn't work.

Before the Lord's Supper, then, let's focus our minds on Jesus, not merely on His loving self-sacrifice on the cross, but on the power that He has to save us today. Without Him, we would be utterly hopeless. However, once we find Him and cling to Him, we need nothing else. Let's think on this as we partake.

Its Meaning for Us

Now that we've explored the work of Christ, let's consider its meaning for us. We'll spend most of our time during this segment in another passage, the first part of Titus 3. Paul here begins by describing **OUR POSITION** before we came to the Lord. We see this grim portrait in Titus 3:3. If there is anywhere in the Bible where our determination to describe ourselves as sinners is centered, it is here. We know our lives and our hearts better than anyone else on earth does. We know all the ugly things we've said, all the ugly things we've done, all the ugly things we've thought. Indeed, before we obeyed the gospel, we spent our lives in the pursuit of evil. Even now that we are Christians, evil constantly sprouts up in our lives like weeds in a garden. We hate it, we do our best to tear it up by the roots, but a week later, there it is again. When we contemplate the life of Christ, His love for others, His passion for the truth, His perfect submission to the Father, even to the point of death, we are painfully aware of how far we fall short of His example. Maybe we'd like to pretend that we're better than that, but we know we aren't, and so even within the church building, that self-description of "sinner" slips easily from our lips. By our own actions, we've earned it.

However, our own actions, our own continual falling short of the glory of God, aren't the end of the story. They aren't the final word on our spiritual condition. Instead, we must also account for **OUR SALVATION**. Paul describes this amazing gift in Titus 3:4-6. Before we were saved, we had chosen to become everything that is repellent to God. God is perfectly holy; He cannot tolerate unholiness in His presence. However, when God saw us, wretched in our sins, He didn't respond to us with loathing, with revulsion. Instead, He reached down to us in kindness and love. We were stuck in the swamp of sin; He

grabbed us by the arms and pulled us out. Paul is careful to point out that this wasn't because we had done anything worthy of salvation. If God had given us what we deserved, we would still be stuck in the swamp.

Instead, it was an act of pure mercy. God saw us when we were unlovely and loved us. He saw that we could not save ourselves and saved us. All of the muck of our sin was washed away in the renewing waters of baptism; our lives were renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit. All of this was and is possible only through Jesus, so that nearly 2000 years later, we still owe our souls to the greatness of His salvation.

Next, Paul describes **THE RESULT** of this spiritual transformation. Titus 3:7 explains. The Bible has a lot of either-or alternatives in it. This text describes one of them. Once, we stood condemned and enslaved by sin. Now, we have been justified by the grace of Christ. Remember that painful self-awareness we discussed a few moments ago, that mental catalogue that all of us carry of all the times when we have fallen short? That's what the unjustified soul looks like. It has performed better in some areas than others, but in every area, it is conspicuously less than it should be.

The justified soul, though, doesn't have that raggedness to it. It doesn't have those gaps. In every respect, it measures up to God's standards. That's not because we suddenly got righteous. It's because we have been made righteous by the grace of Jesus. It's like when the highway department takes some beat-up, potholed old road and repairs it by laying down a completely new surface of fresh asphalt. The old road is still down there somewhere, but it's been buried. All that matters now is the new. In the same way, all that matters about any of us is the renewal of Jesus. He has made us all as complete as we could possibly be.

As a consequence of this, we also become heirs of the hope of life. We can look forward to spending eternity in the presence of God. Logically speaking, this means that we cannot be sinners. God can't abide the presence of sin. If we were still sinners, we would spend the life to come in torment with all the other sinners. Instead, we have become something else. We have become saints, holy ones, not because we were so perfect and good on our own, but because Jesus made us holy when He cleansed us from sins.

Even though these things are still true, I suspect that most of us still feel reluctance to let the words, "I'm a saint", pass our lips, even in this setting, where everybody knows what a saint actually is. We certainly don't want to tell people in the world that we are righteous! In this regard, though, we need to consider the point that Paul makes about **BOASTING**. This appears not in Titus, but in Galatians 6:14. Note that Paul starts off with the same hatred of boasting that we do. He doesn't want to talk about how righteous and holy he is on his own. He knows better, just like all of us do.

However, Paul will boast in the cross of the Lord Jesus. He will shout from the rooftops how wonderful the God is who has saved Him. When we are unwilling to describe ourselves as holy, I fear that this boasting in Jesus is precisely what we are refusing to engage in. We're so stuck on the greatness of our sins that we aren't willing to acknowledge that our salvation is even greater. When I say that I am righteous, that doesn't glorify me. On my own, I'm far from it. Instead, it glorifies the magnificent power of the blood of Jesus, blood so powerful that it washed me clean from my sins, so that I'm fully as innocent in the sight of God as my two children are. What's more, if Jesus can save me, He can save anybody. By all means, let us be careful never to boast in ourselves, but let us never be afraid to boast in the cross of Jesus either.

I Can't, But God Can

Now that we've seen God's ability to do things that are utterly beyond us, let's look at some other areas in which that ability manifests itself, some other things that we can't do, but God can do. First, God can **KEEP ME FROM STUMBLING**. Jude tells us so in Jude 24-25. This too strikes us as an outrageous statement. However, isn't it true? Let's all ask ourselves: why is it that we sin? When is it when we sin? I don't know about the rest of you, but I know when I struggle with sin in my life. It's not when I respond to temptation by opening the Bible, turning to relevant passages, and allowing the revelation of the Holy Spirit to convict my heart. It isn't when I begin praying as soon as I am tempted and continue praying until the temptation passes. Instead, I sin when I don't make any special effort to seek God's help, when I'm determined to bull through it on my own, or worse still, when I don't seek God's help because I don't actually want to resist the temptation. In other words, I sin when I rely on myself. I resist when I rely on God.

Let's all remember this the next time that we are tempted. God has given us all the help we need. We just need to use it. All we have to do is crack the book and allow its truth to strengthen us, or approach the throne of God and plead for His help, or call one of our brothers or sisters and ask them to pray for us or

help us in some other way. If we are steadfast in these things in response to temptation, we aren't going to sin. Of course, we're still going to have problems when we don't identify the temptation before it's too late, but study and prayer and time with other Christians is going to help those things out too. The battle against sin is tough for all of us, but even though we aren't going to win it on our own, we can win it through God.

Second, God can **PUT ME INTO SERVICE**. Paul describes his experience with this in 1 Timothy 1:12-13. There are a lot of Christians out there who don't do much for the Lord because they feel inadequate. They don't want to teach a Bible class because they think they wouldn't know what to say. They don't want to share the gospel because they're so aware of their own imperfections. They don't want to visit shut-ins because they think it would feel awkward.

Before we get so down on ourselves, though, we need to remember the apostle Paul. If we think we're unqualified, how much more was he unqualified! In some ways, Paul's lack of qualification is obvious to us. We can see how his history as a persecutor of the church of Christ would make it difficult for him to proclaim the gospel of Christ. However, that's far from the only problem he had. Remember: in order for a man to be qualified to be an apostle, he had to have been a witness of the ministry of Jesus, along with His death, burial, and resurrection. Paul wasn't. Paul sat at the feet of Gamaliel, not Jesus, and all through Paul's work, people insisted that he wasn't a true apostle. That's why just about every epistle Paul wrote contains some defense of his apostleship. He wasn't adequate to be an apostle, but God made him adequate.

Now, friends, if God could use Paul as He wished despite all of those inadequacies, God can surely use all of us! The biggest problem that stands between us and service isn't our inadequacies. It is our unwillingness. Let's remember that. Let's strengthen ourselves with study and prayer, so that we can serve.

Third, God can **REVEAL HIS SON IN ME**. This also happened to Paul, according to Galatians 1:15-16. This too sounds like an extraordinarily arrogant thing to claim about oneself. None of us wants to claim that we live like Jesus did, and yet it is true that if we seek Him, His light will be reflected in us. We might not be able to see that in ourselves, but we can certainly see it in our brethren when we pay attention. When I see one brother refuse to speak ill of another despite provocation, that's a glimpse of the light of Christ. When I see a sister in Christ go out of her way to serve, that's another glimmer. When I'm leading singing and I look out across the congregation, and I see from somebody's face how caught up they are in the worship, that's another one. Perhaps most of all, when I see a Christian bear up under some immense tragedy with courage, dignity, and faith, like the Smelters did recently when they lost their son/brother Adam, that's when I *really* start seeing Christ in them. That awe that we feel then is similar to the awe that we would feel in the presence of Jesus Himself, and all of these glimpses combine to form a composite portrait of Him.

This doesn't happen in people because they just started out good. It happens because they have steadfastly sought God for years or decades, and through a course of prayer, study, and obedience, they have invited God to work through their lives. If we extend that same invitation, Christ will reveal Himself in us.

Finally, even though I can't transform myself, in me, God can **DO MORE THAN I IMAGINE**. Look at Ephesians 3:21. This is all the more amazing because of all that God has already done in me. When I was dead in my trespasses and sins, He made me alive together with Christ. I was headed to hell, but now I'm headed to heaven, not because of my own wonderfulness, but because of the greatness of His grace.

And yet, God still has so much more to do in me, and I see the measure of what He will do in what He's already done. When I look back only ten years, it's easy for me to see that I've changed a lot, and I've changed a lot for the good. I'm less inclined to shoot my mouth off than I used to be. I'm a better husband. I'm a lot more comfortable with evangelism. I can even write and arrange hymn tunes, which I certainly could not ten years ago, and, indeed, never expected to be able to do.

I'm not saying all of this to thump my own chest about how great I am, because I know I didn't do it. Instead, God working through me did it, all the glory goes to Him, and all the glory for all the other changes He will make in me goes to Him too. I'm sure God wanted to do more in me, but I wouldn't let Him. All the failures in me are mine, not His. However, if we get ourselves out of the way, seek Him, and let Him go to work, He will transform us into people who are unrecognizably different from who we used to be.