

Salvation's Passive Imperatives

3rd Sun. of Easter – 04/23/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Acts 2:14, 36-41 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 38, [Peter said,] “**Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ...**”.

v.40 (Literal translation from the Greek,) “...**Be saved from this warped generation.**”

Introduction

✘ Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

✘ I know that none of you signed up to be Greek experts, or even grammar experts here today, but that's one of the great blessings and benefits of our particular Church body. We are definitely in the minority among Christian churches, in that every pastor of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod is required to learn and pass a proficiency test in Biblical Greek.

→ Now the reason I share this with you today is that, for today's Reading from Acts, chapter two, knowing what the original Greek says is crucial, because sadly, most of the English translations have led so many people and churches into a false understanding of God's salvation message in this text.

✘ There are two prominent features in the Greek grammar of this section of God's Word that actually protect us from these dangerous misunderstandings and beliefs.

→ The first is what are called “imperative” verbs. An imperative verb is a direct call to immediate action. It is not an option, but a command. When a parent says, “pick up your toys” that parent expects the toys in the family room to be picked up because that's what is best for the child and the rest of the family.

→ But responding immediately and obediently to a command is not only against our American way of thinking, it goes entirely against the core of our very nature as human beings. We don't want anyone giving us commands or direction – including God. Paul says in Romans 5:10 that Jesus came and died for us all because from birth “we were enemies” of God. And later in Romans 8:7, he says that “the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.”

✘ The second grammar item is what we call “passive” verbs. I'll explain that a little later.

I. “Repent” (turn around)

✘ The first imperative in our text is in verse 38; one simple word, “Repent”. From the get-go we must understand the most foundational thing about the Biblical teaching of repentance. When it is used in the Bible, God always intends repentance to be mankind's reaction or response, to God's Law and Gospel.

→ In verse 36, Peter tells the people, “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” Well folks, we are “the house of Israel” today; those whom 1 Timothy 2:4 refers to when it says that God “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

→ And yet it only takes one sin against one Commandment to be guilty of breaking every Commandment. James 2:10 says, “Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.” So, since not one of us is perfect, than you and I have all crucified Jesus in our sin too!

✘ Notice though what the people's reaction was when Peter convicted them of their sin. Verse 37 says that “when they heard this they were cut to the heart”. This is what the Bible calls

“contrition” or true sorrow and regret for the sin that I have committed. It means no excuses are added on; no ifs or buts, no attempts to pass the blame onto someone else is allowed. In Isaiah 66:2 Yahweh says, “this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at My word.”

→ Now, I will admit that for many years I had a wrong understanding of the response that these Israelites gave to Peter. When they asked in verse 37, “What shall we do?” I viewed it as a self-centered, unfaithful question; assuming that they believed that it was up to them and their actions to set things right with God. I was wrong not to take God’s Word seriously in verse 37 that “they were cut to the heart”. Theirs was a complete confession of their guilt; a full recognition of their helplessness in regard to that guilt.

→ Acts 5:31 says, “God exalted [Jesus] at His right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.” You see, repentance, at its core, is God’s work within a person’s heart, in which He performs an entire inner change so that the person is literally “turned around” away from sin and back to Jesus as his/her Savior.

→ So the imperative “Repent” means “don’t reject the gift of turning that comes from God, but submit entirely to it”. It’s the same with you and me today, just as it was for the Israelites in our text. God has given us the gift of repentance in which He earnestly desires to turn your heart from sin to His Son, Jesus.

II. “Be Baptized”

⊗ Now, I told you that the second grammatical point in this text is that of “passive” verbs – in particular “passive imperative” verbs. A “passive” verb conveys the idea that the subject is being acted upon by an outside force or power. So if I say that “The ball was kicked”, the ball is completely “passive” and inactive. The “kicking” was acted upon the ball. And the ball gets no credit for the fact that it moves.

→ Now think of a “passive imperative”. A command is still being uttered, but it’s a command where the subject remains completely “passive” in the action that is being brought to bear upon him/her. In other words, if you and I are the subjects of this command, we are not to reject the action that comes upon us. Instead we are to submit to the action that is being done to, through and with us.

⊗ So in verse 38, immediately after Peter tells the people, “Repent”, he continues with, “and be baptized”. “Be baptized” in the original Greek is a passive imperative verb. And in God’s Word “repent and be baptized” always go together to describe one entire unified concept; one call from God; meaning that repentance and baptism are first a free gift from God in His love and desire to have all sinners with Him in a new and right relationship. And second, that you and I are not the ones who are doing even one ounce of the work. It is all God from start to finish!

→ Sadly though, many people and churches believe that repentance and baptism are entirely their act of obedience to God. But the passive imperative here, coupled with the next words, “...in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins...” decisively shows their understanding to be a false teaching. That means that repentance and baptism is not only a “free gift” but it is also entirely God’s work, because after all only God can “forgive sins”.

⊗ Think of a check that you sign to pay a bill. That check is worth nothing until you sign your name to it, right? Well, in baptism, applying water does nothing but get the person wet, until it is done “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Once the Triune God’s signature is proclaimed and attached, then the promise of full and free forgiveness is applied and paid in full!

→ And God's redeeming work, done in His perfect and almighty name, means there is no bounced checks; no such thing as "insufficient funds" in this activity. Jesus' bloody sacrifice and glorious resurrection is entirely accessed so that the old "enemy of God" is drowned in baptism and the new man/woman comes forth wrapped in the robe of Christ's righteousness. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

✘ This is "the gift of the Holy Spirit" that verse 38 promises. The Holy Spirit's gift is repentance, baptism and forgiveness at same time that repentance, baptism and forgiveness gives "the gift of the Holy Spirit".

→ Verse 39 tells us that it is God's guarantee; the "promise" that He gives "for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself." The Greek word translated as "children" there is "τέκνοις" (teknois) which refers to a child of any age – from the smallest to the oldest. And that fits, because if God actually wants all people to be saved, and if He's the one doing all of the work, then the historic practice of baptizing everyone, from newborn to elderly as the means through which He saves people by grace through faith in His Son, is all perfectly consistent.

III. "Be Saved"

✘ Finally in verse 40 Peter exhorts the men of that day, and you and me today, with another passive imperative. But the majority of the English Bible translations, for some reason, ignore the "passive" nature of the Greek imperative in the second half of that verse. So literally from the Greek, Peter "exhorts them saying, 'Be saved from this warped generation'."

→ Again, we've already made it clear I hope that none of those people or any of the rest of us can do anything at all to "save ourselves" as the English translations seem to make it out to be. We have no choice, we are the passive ones in this process of salvation. God is the one and only acting power. As Paul says in Ephesians 2:5, "even when we were dead in our trespasses, (God) made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved."

✘ And the Greek word for "warped" or "crooked" is "σκολιός" (skolios) and it describes a warped piece of timber that carpenters must throw away because it is useless to them. Just as the predominant culture was at the time of Jesus and the Apostles, so this "generation" that we live in today has become, and continues to "progressively" increase in its "warped" and perverse ways of redefining what is right and what is wrong; what is healthy and safe versus what is diseased and dangerous.

→ Examples abound, from changing God's definition of marriage, to rejecting His determination that only one of two genders is assigned each person from birth, to rebuffing the value of hard work, to scoffing at His declaration that He is the one and only true God and that He has given us the only true revelation of objective truth in the Holy Bible!

✘ In this verse Peter convicts all people and all beliefs that are against His Word, in any and every generation as being "warped" and bound for eternal destruction in the trash pile of hell. And he urges every single soul to submit instead to God's powerful and redeeming work in repentance and baptism when he says, "be saved" from this generation of destruction and death!

→ Again, this is not God being oppressive and controlling as so many people want to try and say He is when He says that living according to what is popular or doing what I "want" or what "feels" right to me is actually a sin. This is not something that is a sign of "weakness" or a "lack of love" as so many today are trying to label those who are in the Christian faith.

→ No, being called to be passive before God so that we might "be saved" from this "warped generation" is actually God's deepest expression of love! It's a show of His wide open arms

reaching out for you and me, to wrap us up into His perfect presence and pull us free from the devil and all of the evil in this world. It is Jesus showering us with His gifts of forgiveness and faith; of strength and joy; of eternal life and the perfect truth that, Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.*