

# IMPOSSIBLE SALVATION

## Impossible Series (Part 4) | Text: Isaiah 53:1-6

### I

Marjorie Kitchell, a pastor in Boulder City, Nevada was preaching a December sermon on the text in which the Apostle Paul writes: **"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 6:23)**. Rev. Kitchell wanted to illustrate for everybody the amazing availability of God's gift of salvation, so she pointed to a particularly beautiful poinsettia on the platform and said: *"Whoever wants this beautiful Christmas poinsettia may have it."* The congregation just stared at her. *"No, seriously, all you have to do is take it."* Marjorie waited. And waited. Finally, a mother raised her hand, timidly, and said, "I'll take it." *"Great! It's yours."* "That's what I wanted," writes Kitchell. "Quick and easy, and on with the application of my sermon."

"But to my astonishment, she nudged her son, 'Go get it for me.' 'No, no,' I said. *'Whoever wants this gift must come and get it personally.'* No one else can do this for you. The woman in her seat just shook her head. Too embarrassing. So, I waited again. "It was a gorgeous flower, unusually large, wrapped in red cellophane with a gold satin ribbon."

"Someone snickered, 'What's the catch?' 'No catch,' I replied. *'It's free!'* No one moved. A college student asked, "Is it glued to the altar?" Everyone laughed. *'It is not glued to the altar. Nor are there any strings attached. It's yours for the taking.'* 'Well,' asked a pretty teenager, 'can I take it after the service?'" Kitchell was tempted to give in but shook her head. *"You must come and get it now."* Today is the day of salvation, she thought (2 Cor 6:2b). The opportunity is great but the offer isn't open forever.

Frankly, says Kitchell, "I was beginning to wish I'd never started the whole thing, when a woman I'd never seen before stood up in the back. Quickly, as if she were afraid she'd change her mind, she strode to the altar and picked up the plant. "I'll take it," she said. As she returned to her seat... I launched with enthusiasm into my [sermon]: *"The gift of God is eternal life. Believe. Receive. It's free!"*

When the service ended and people were making their way out, the woman who'd claimed the poinsettia lingered behind and then slowly approached the preacher as she was packing up her Bible and sermon notes. Clutching the plant close to her chest, she blurted: "This flower is too pretty to just take home for free. I couldn't do that with a clear conscience." "Here!" she said, shooting out her hand. Stunned for a moment, Marjorie watched the person stride away. "I looked down at the crumpled paper she had stuffed into my hand. It was a ten dollar bill." <sup>1</sup>

## II

I tell this little story because it seems to illustrate in a helpful way, the struggle that a lot of us have about the whole subject of salvation. For one thing, the notion that salvation would be freely given to us seems IMPOSSIBLE. "You can't tell me that something as flaming-red-spectacular as the assurance of the complete forgiveness of all my sins and an admission ticket to eternal communion with God could be without cost to us. Really? You're telling me that all that stuff I've done or said that I would be utterly humiliated to have put up on the video screen (in triple-wide format) is just overwritten... and all that stuff I should have done or said but was too selfish or scared to is wiped away... and that God welcomes me just as I am into a life with him that will go on forever... and that I just have to believe and receive it... That's IMPOSSIBLE! Where are the strings? What's the catch?!"

We come by this skepticism naturally. So much of the rest of our lives is about earning and paying for things. Especially this time of year! Did I do well enough to earn that bonus? Have I accumulated enough in my account to pay for all these things I just bought? In almost every sphere where there IS a big pay-off, it's almost always because we put in something big ourselves. Somebody didn't just FREELY give us an Eagle Scout award or a college admission letter or a job promotion or an airline upgrade. We got those things because, in one way or another, we racked up a lot of POINTS! Heck, not even Santa hands out FREE presents. *"He knows if you've been bad or good so be good for goodness sake!"*

When I was growing up, I worked hard at being good. I know my parents and grandparents didn't mean for me to think that my intrinsic worth or my value to them was tied to how well I did in school or sports or other arenas, but I developed that mindset just the same. Maybe some of you did too. This performance culture is pervasive and powerful in American life. We go through life anxiously assessing our looks and social media likes, our grades and our accolades. Some of us conclude that our point total is pretty high compared to a lot of people. Others of us conclude that our score is disappointingly low.

This way of looking at ourselves carries over into our relationship with God and the confidence we feel about our eternal salvation. Some of us conclude that we are quite "secure" in the Salvation Department because our performance is obviously above the bar we've established as "good." We've done enough good deeds, gone to enough religious services, put enough in the offering plate to take the Poinsettia home. Others of us are not so sure. When we think of our moral performance – all that we've done or failed to do – we feel "insecure." If God, like Santa, has really been paying attention to the Naughty things, then we reckon we're doomed. When you consider your performance, do you tend to feel "secure" or "insecure" about your eternal salvation?

## III

It's a trick question, really, because if Christmas tells us anything, it tells us that our salvation is not ultimately based on OUR performance.

If we could rack up enough points by our good behaviors to impress God into saving us then Jesus would not have needed to be born into this world. All God would have needed to do was send a prophet who pointed at the Pharisees or Sadducees or Priests of ancient Israel and say: "Do what those people do and you'll be fine." Those people rarely missed a religious service. They followed the requirements of the Jewish law with obsessive loyalty. They dropped coins into the plate every week. They scrupulously avoided contact with corrupt people and dirty things. They were extremely good by human standards. But the Christ Child would grow up one day to say: **Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:20).**

What God considers righteous (which is Bible speak for "properly aligned") is very hard for us to get our minds around. We tend to have a Santa-sized notion of goodness. We think of it in terms of "naughty or nice;" and because many of us feel that we are, generally, more nice than naughty we must be "good." God, however, lives in a state of absolutely consistent, pure, radiant goodness for which the Bible uses the word, "holiness." Because God's ways are higher than our ways, we will never fully grasp the meaning of holiness in this life (Isa 55:9). But one of the greatest gifts God made to us in the person of Jesus is a tiny glimpse of what his level of goodness looks like.

Holiness is the kind of goodness that is willing to walk away from cosmic comforts and eternal ecstasies and enter into a vulnerable human baby body in order to get close enough to build relationships with people whose processing power is to his as a bacterium's is to Beethoven's. And I think I'm good because I occasionally suffer people who strike me as a bit boring or foolish.

Holiness is the kind of goodness that is willing to work for thirty years in obscurity, patiently waiting for the right time to speak up when those around him are finally ready to hear a message so brilliant and life-changing, that people are still repeating it two-thousand years later. But I think I am good, because I avoid interrupting my wife or co-workers for a full five minutes to gift them with words they'll forget in two minutes.

Holiness is the kind of goodness so tuned to the needs of others that it forsakes its own needs to feed five thousand growling souls and stomachs on a hillside or to wait by a well for a lonely outcast, or to sense the touch of a quietly bleeding woman amidst the press a roaring crowd. And I think I am amazing because I finally and reluctantly give into some repeated request for charitable giving.

Holiness is the kind of goodness that bends to lift the lame, embraces leper, and go out of his way to build bridges with people his nation hates. But I think I am good because

I say a cheery hello to strangers as I walk on by. Holiness is the kind of goodness that when he is nailed to a cross and could vaporize his killers with the bat of an eyelash, chooses to respond to their jeering by saying, "Father, forgive them." And I think I'm good because I don't curse out (at least out loud) the people who inconvenience me.

Jesus once said: **"No one is good except God alone" (Mark 10:18)**. And when we really study his life and then study our lives, we start realizing that offering our version of goodness as a payment sufficient to earn our forgiveness and admission into God's eternal company shows a stunning, embarrassing misunderstanding of the circumstances. Talk about IMPOSSIBLE. It's remotely like offering ten bucks for the gift of a spectacular Christmas poinsettia and thinking, "I'm sure this covers it."

#### IV

But here's the really amazing news of Christmas. We are not asked to pay for our salvation at all. We don't have the goodness in us to offset the weight of our sin and balance the scales of God's holy justice. We don't have the goodness in us to open the door of heaven. No one is that good except God alone. And so out of His goodness, God supplied in the person of Jesus Christ the only sacrifice pure and weighty enough to completely and sufficiently counterbalance our sin. In the shape of his body, Jesus supplied the only key that opens heaven's gates.

As Isaiah prophesied 700 years before crucifixion was invented or Jesus was born... **Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; [but] the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4-6)**

Eight centuries later, an angel from heaven appeared to a faithful man named Joseph and declared that Isaiah's prophecy was now to be fulfilled. The angel said: **Mary will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus [literally, "God saves"], because he will save his people from their sins." (Matt 1:21)**

Here is the simple truth I hope we can grasp afresh this Christmas: We sin but God saves. Jesus has done all the work necessary for our salvation. It is his gift, freely given. All that is asked of you as you stare from your seat at this Poinsettia-red good news is that you believe it and receive it. No one can do this for you. You must come and get this gift for yourself. Take it into your heart today and let the glory of Christ's love change you from the inside out.

I'll tell you how you can know if you've truly received and taken home this gift. Hereafter, any service you attend... every dollar you give... any good deed you do...

each act of sacrifice, service, or surrender you make will no longer be an attempt to EARN anything. It will simply be your joyful way of imitating Jesus and thanking him for the gift of forgiveness and eternal life he has given you.

If you are ready to receive this gift for the first time or ready to reclaim it, please bow your head and pray with me...

*Dearest God, this is the most important prayer some of us have ever offered. We humbly confess that we have been too deluded about our own goodness to recognize our need of you or too discouraged about our badness to trust in the sufficiency of what you did for us on the Cross. Today, however, we start anew. In the depths of our soul, we walk down the aisle... We take into our arms and heart the blood-red gift of salvation that you have purchased and freely given to us. We claim the truth that our sins have been fully forgiven and that heaven is now assuredly our future home. Thank you, Jesus. Now send us forth with joy to live our lives anew. In your holy name we pray. Amen.*

**For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. (Eph 2:8-9)**

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<sup>1</sup> Marjorie Kitchell, *Leadership*, Vol. 11, no. 2