

Introduction: It has been a difficult year. Just before we celebrated the resurrection from the dead of Jesus, much of our country shut down. There was a fear that many would die due to the highly contagious world-wide virus spreading at what was deemed a dangerous rate. *** The stress caused by the pandemic exposed racial tensions that stay under the surface when times are good. But the tensions snapped when a handful of rogue racist police officers killed black people without cause. *** Both of these major events of 2020 caused our already divided country to be even more divided, to some people it feels we are hopelessly divided. *** Our Christmas Sunday text begins by telling us the natural state of human beings is to be worthy of being hated. This condition leads to people hating one another. Once again this ancient book, The Bible, is uncanny in the way it can describe what is happening in our lives some twenty centuries after it was written. *** But, The Good News is that in His great Mercy, God sent The Savior so we could become new people, washed and renewed in The Holy Spirit. This can result in us being heirs to God's three-fold life: eternal, abundant, and bearing good fruit. *** Let's find this renewed life and more in our text.

I. Four truths about ourselves that we tend to suppress. (Verse 3)

A. All people begin their lives in ignorance and rebellion. (Verse 3a-b)

1. Because once we were being ignorant. (Verse 3a)

Ignorance: Ignorant people do not understand God, His ways, the world He created, and people – His final creation. It is the opposite of wisdom, being able to properly apply God's Word in all of our life.

2. And, we were disobedient. (Verse 3b)

Disobedience: Disobedience is rebellion against God. It is being unwilling to obey God and His appointed authorities.

B. These two conditions result in four negative states of being and actions. (Verse c-f)

1. We let ourselves be deceived. (Verse 3c)

Good life: There is always a new and popular way to have a good life. Eat this food. Drink this beverage. Own this car. Take this vacation. Do this activity. Wear these clothes. Live in this house. Whatever ... Then, your life will be fulfilling. And there are always people who will be led astray by advertising and their own covetousness to be willing to spend money on some or all of these things. And this will make other people financially wealthy. (But not with friends as George Bailey.)

Why?: People do this because we are all foolish to some extent. We do NOT think correctly.

We are NOT being obedient to God first and foremost.

2. We are always surrendering to lusts and hedonistic pleasures of different sorts. (Verse 3d)

Consumer society: There is an abundance of products with billions of dollars of advertising behind them to get some five percent of the market and huge profits. Research has shown just how to 'pitch' products to convince people that IF they consume this product they will have their deepest unspoken needs met. How much 'stuff' do we have lying around our houses that we only used for a short time and put to the side when we realized it was not going to make us feel fulfilled?

3. In malice and envy we are passing through. (Verse 3e)

Envy: People who observe life and others are amazed how we are all driven to some extent by envy of what other people have and we cannot afford. And, sadly for many it can lead to malice.

Malice: Malice is when envy or jealousy over what someone else has leads a person to obsessively wish misfortune on that other person. It is psychological violence and hatred that is suppressed from other people.

But, sometimes, as especially in 2020, it leads to actual violence.

4. The terrible end to all the above truths makes us detestable and hating one another. (Verse 3f)

Shocking but true: Here is a Jewish church planter writing to a Greek bishop of Crete saying this is who they both were before they knew and surrendered their lives to The Savior-King whose birth we remember today. Have you ever thought about the church fathers in this light before?

It is us too: Paul and Titus, before they received Jesus as their Savior, stand for all people of all times and places who still have dead spirits. We have seen examples of how human nature has not improved in 2,000 years. In fact, what Paul wrote to the churches in Rome is still true: '[people] invent ways of doing evil'. (Romans 1:30) I will be quiet for ten seconds so we can let these uncomfortable truths about ourselves settle into our hearts and minds.

II. God's salvation: He sent His Son to earth to save through washing in The Holy Spirit to inherit the hope of life.

(Verses 4-7)

A. God appeared [in human flesh and blood] to save us according to His Mercy. (Verses 4-5a)

1. But when the kindness and philanthropy of God our Savior appeared (Verse 4)

Philanthropy: This is a Greek word taken into English which literally means 'brotherly love of mankind'.

Plato used it in the sense of benevolence. It can be thought of as a friendly disposition toward people.

Christmas: Jesus came to earth as a human baby, born to a virgin with God as His Father, conceived by The Holy Spirit. He did this to become our 'best brother' because of the LOVE of God for people.

Incarnation: God appeared to all people IN His Son, The Savior Jesus, entirely of His initiative. No human could have conceived of the incarnation (The Spirit God taking on a human body) or made the incarnation a reality. Seeing our desperate need and loving us, God did the miraculous. He clothed His Son in a human body through the young virgin woman Mary.

2. ... NOT of works of righteousness we had done, but according to His Mercy He saved us. (*Verse 5a*)

Our works: Our works are never enough to satisfy God's holy, righteous perfection. God has spoken: 'No man can redeem the life of another ... no payment is ever enough' (*Psalms 49:7-9*). And in a moment of conviction His people confess: 'All our righteous acts are like filthy rags' (*Isaiah 64:1-8*). Ouch! We do not like hearing this truth about ourselves.

MERCY: The meaning of Mercy includes compassion and sympathy. Mercy is an expression of pity towards one who is suffering and cannot help himself. This is how God feels for each person.

Salvation: Biblical salvation is fuller and more complete than many people realize. Yes, it is forgiveness of sins by God through faith in Jesus that brings dead human spirits to life. And, it also can bring physical healing. But, most important, salvation begins a life-long transformation of the human soul: heart, mind and will. As people grow in God's salvation IN Jesus, God helps them to be changed so they can overcome deception, lust and malice that lead to hatred.

God gave The Savior according to His Mercy

- B. The cleansing of The Holy Spirit who is abundantly poured out through Jesus. (*Verses 5b-6*)

1. By washing, rebirth and renewal of The Holy Spirit. (*Verse 5b*)

Three-IN-One God: Jesus is the one who appeared to save people who recognize their need and cry out to God to be forgiven, reconciled, saved and changed. At the moment of salvation, The Father and The Son send The Holy Spirit to be in the saved person in order to wash (change by cleaning) that person by rebirth and renewal.

Christmas: SO, Jesus was born to save people who confess and surrender in faith to God because of the Mercy of The Father and for the cleansing work of The Holy Spirit.

2. Cleansing is the gift of pouring out in abundance. (*Verse 6*)

LOVE poured out: At the first Communion Jesus said of the last cup: 'This is My Blood of The Covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'. (*Matthew 26:27-28; Mark 14:2*) Paul wrote to churches in Rome: 'God has poured out His LOVE by The Holy Spirit'. (*Romans 5:1-8*) God's Mercy to save flows from His LOVE.

God gave The Savior according to His Mercy

- C. Having been justified by His Grace, people become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (*Verse 7*)

Justified: When God justifies a person, He begins to make that person righteous. No human can bring about his or her own righteousness. It is a work of God by Grace: His gift to people.

Heirs: Asking for and receiving salvation in Jesus makes people heirs of God. Jesus' death provides an inheritance to those who trust in and obey the words God has spoken.

Life: God's Life IN Jesus is eternal (*John 3:16*), abundant (*John 10:7-11*), and it has purpose: to bear the fruit of God's LOVE to people in the world SO they may be saved by God's Mercy in Jesus and The Holy Spirit (*John 15:9-16*, in the context of *John 13-16*). God's three-fold gift of life is IN His Son, Jesus, who also became a flesh and blood human.

We must receive this life by faith, and by the gift The Holy Spirit, we must grow in the character of Jesus to do the mission He has given us: namely to make disciples of people of every nation. When we obey God by faith, He helps us to overcome the divisions we create by hatred. We overcome hatred that divides by obeying God's saving gift of Jesus in faith every day.

The gift of Jesus must be received and used daily

Call: I hope some of you have been encouraged to continue to grow as disciples (followers who learn) of The Savior; that others have been moved to commit to grow deeper in their relationship of obedient faith IN Jesus; and some others have finally felt their need for The Savior Jesus to the extent they will consider coming to Him on His terms. To be heirs of His complete salvation people must admit their need of Him, be willing to be humble before Him, and to totally depend on Him to change them so they can obey by faith all He has commanded. We can make these humanly impossible commitments when we know The Three-IN-One God is full of LOVE to humanity and has Mercy to save through Jesus and finally to seal our salvation by abundantly pouring out The Holy Spirit in us.

God gave The Savior according to His Mercy

Conclusion: Deceived, lustful, envious and detestable people who hate one another can be saved because God's LOVE for mankind appeared in His Son, beginning at Bethlehem at Christmas, to save people according to His Mercy by the washing and rebirth of The Holy Spirit into righteousness and three-fold life as God's heirs who believe and obey His words.

God gave The Savior according to His Mercy