

Dear Friend,

All of us depend upon others to meet our needs. It would be impossible to live without trusting in other people. I trust the teller at my bank to put the money I deposit into my account and not into her account. I trust that the officers of the bank are watching the tellers and that the regulatory agencies are watching the officers. I depend upon my family. When I am at home I can “be myself” and know that my wife and children are going to accept me most of the time. When I’m not being a very nice person they may correct me but they will not run out the door and abandon me because I’m not in the best of moods today. It is very apparent that all of us trust other people all the time to meet a variety of needs.

The Scriptures regularly point out how good it is when dependable people surround us. It is good when we have a government that we can trust, spouses that are faithful, business people who are trustworthy, children that are obedient, friends who accept us and correct us. The book of Proverbs in particular is full of statements like these, “faithful are the wounds of a friend.” “A wife of noble character is her husband’s crown.” “A wise son brings joy to his father.” “By justice a king gives a country stability.” “Honest scales and balances are from the Lord.”

In light of how complete is our dependence upon others there is a surprising command in Psalm 146. Verse three says, “Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men who cannot save.” While we must depend upon others to live in this world there is a kind of trust in people that is wrong. There is a way of trusting in people that is the opposite of trusting in God. The key to discerning whether my faith in people is of the variety that the Lord would condemn is the middle clause in v. 3. We should not trust in princes, in mortal men because “they cannot save.”

The question we must answer as we think about what we are trusting people for is this: “What is salvation?” “What does it mean to be saved?” When we talk about salvation we are talking about people being rescued out of some danger and into some happy condition. If you are a hostage in Iraq, you are saved when you escape your captors and are flown back home to your own country and people. Biblical salvation is escaping the greatest danger that faces us, God’s just condemnation of us due to our sin. Our greatest problem is always our own sin and the just wrath of God that our sin calls forth. Our greatest good, the greatest thing that could happen to us is when this just and holy God forgives us and brings us into an eternal relationship with him. There is no greater good that we can obtain than that of being loved by God forever.

When does God condemn our faith in other people? It is when we define our greatest need as something other than our sin and our greatest good as something other than an eternal relationship with him. If my greatest problem is that I have cancer and thus I am trusting in a doctor to solve this greatest problem and give me “salvation”, which I define as being cancer free, then I am doing what God tells me not to do in v. 3. The doctor can deliver me from cancer but he cannot deliver me from my greatest problem, which is my sin. He may be able to give me remission from cancer; he cannot give me eternal life with God. It’s right to depend on the doctor to treat my cancer. It is wrong to believe that if I am cancer free that my greatest problem is solved.

How do I know if I'm depending on people in appropriate ways and not counting on them to "save" me? I think there are a number of ways that God helps us to discern if our faith in people is illegitimate. First, what happens to us when people let us down? When people don't deliver the promised "salvation" am I overcome by anger or sadness or bitterness? Another indicator is what happens when I receive the "salvation" I've been looking for? Is my joy coming from the knowledge that my sins are forgiven and God loves me or does it only come when I am healthy or have a nice conversation? Psalm 146 begins and ends with praise to the Lord. This is another indicator in my life. Do I spend my time rejoicing in and praising people and what they do for me or the Lord and his saving work on my behalf? Do I spend my time complaining about all the ways that people let me down or declaring how God has done the most astonishing thing in the universe, saved a sinner like me?

All of us by nature trust in princes and mortal men who cannot save. May the Lord have mercy upon us that we might enjoy the blessed life of hoping in him alone for our salvation.

Hoping in the God of Jacob,