

## Justified by Faith

### Romans 5:1-8

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup> through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup> and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

<sup>6</sup> For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. <sup>8</sup> But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

My dear friend, Rev. Shirley Martinson, who has preached here on a few occasions, had a conversation with me about a year ago. We were lamenting that we talk with some Christians, members of the church, that make statements that they are not sure about their relationship with God. Statements like “I pray that what I have done and the way I have lived are acceptable to God for my salvation.” As a result, Shirley and the Disciples Women of Journey of Faith Christian Church of Ann Arbor agreed to plan and host the spring women’s retreat this year. They even let me come along for the ride in case Shirley didn’t feel like traveling to Michigan from Iowa this spring. Unfortunately, the in-person retreat has been postponed and we will have a Zoom retreat instead. Either way, there continues to be a great need for all of us to be reminded that we are justified by faith, not our works. Justification means being declared righteous. It is a legal term used in the Bible to describe the act of God in which God declares that a person is not guilty. A person who is justified is therefore in a state of acceptance with God. It is not how we obey the Ten Commandments, how much we give, how much we pray, but having faith is what declares us righteous; declares us “not guilty;” declares us acceptable to God.

I was talking with a work colleague last week, who said she thought she was in control before this current pandemic. She thought she could come and go, do what she pleased and would be safe. Then coronavirus happened and she understands how important her faith is in sustaining her. Our generation is not the first to needed to be reminded of this. Martin Luther discovered justification by faith. Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk that was striving hard to find a sense of acceptance with God. He knew he was a sinner, and he tried to overcome his tremendous sense of guilt by imposing all kinds of strict disciplines on himself. Not only did he deny himself many of the normal comforts of life but he also went to extraordinary lengths inflicting pain on his body in order to somehow “do penance” and rid his life of the power of sin. But none of this worked for him. Being a scholar though, he had access to the Holy Scriptures, and through his study of the Book of Romans he came to an understanding that being right with God was never attainable by such works. He came to see that God's way of making people right with Himself was through the perfect sacrifice of Christ, and that what was required in the first instance, above all, was faith in God, and trust in Him.

In this opening verse of Scripture Paul shares peace with God as a benefit of the Christian's faith. This peace is caused by the resolution of hostility that exists between humanity and God because of sin. Paul reminds us that it is "through our Lord Jesus Christ" that animosity dissipates and the struggle of humanity against God resolves. As recipients of peace, we believers gain access into a place of grace through Jesus Christ. John Newton spoke of such grace in his well-known hymn, "Amazing Grace":

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,  
that saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
was blind but now I see.  
'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,

and grace my fears relieved;  
How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!

In these words, we learn that it is by faith Newton understood himself to be saved and ushered into a state of grace. Paul also makes it clear in Romans 5:2 that we Christians stand in this grace. It is unearned and undeserved. This is why grace is so amazing.

Paul invites the subject of boasting into his discussion. Earlier, in 4:2, Paul speaks of boasting in a negative way, because the boasting is based upon being justified or being declared righteous by works we do. The boasting that Paul now refers to is boasting in the hope of sharing God's glory in the future. This hope is sure and certain because of the experience of grace we believers have in the present. Not our works and accomplishments, but God is the subject of the boasting. Christians, you and me, can boast in the grace of God, which amplifies God's goodness toward us and everyone else who do not deserve it. This boasting is appropriate in Paul's mind because it calls attention to what God has done. When boasting brings attention to the grace God lavishly gives to us believers through Jesus Christ, it brings glory to God, for in Christ the favor of God toward us is demonstrated. This favor is granted, not because of our goodness, but because of God's goodness.

We hear these verses and we are inspired to celebrate God's grace. These words remind us that we are indeed a blessed and highly favored people. We no longer have to experience embarrassment because of past misdeeds or even current weaknesses and struggles. Paul reminded us through this passage that we cannot win God's favor. We need only accept God's grace.

After speaking of the hope of sharing the future glory of God, Paul turns to the present sufferings and suggests the response of you and me as believers should be

to boast about our sufferings. Most of us do not understand the notion of boasting in sufferings. In fact, admitting our struggles is often embarrassing, as we like to claim we can make it on our own! What Paul is suggesting is that the only reason we can boast in our sufferings is because of what we know. What we know is suffering produces endurance and character. Both of these attributes are needed, given our present struggles. We understand endurance – it is what we have been experiencing for the past three months of self-isolation and social distancing, something we will never forget.

When Paul uses the term "character" he is speaking of "tested character." Our tested character is what produces the hope that Paul speaks of. It is a hope that we are sure of because "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (v. 5). This love so saturates the being of us as believers in our present predicament that we are certain of the hope, even though it is yet to come. It is this understanding of what is yet to come that led writers of the Negro spirituals to compose songs such as "Nobody Knows the Trouble I See." The opening lines of the melody tell of the trouble the African slave knew in America:

Nobody knows the trouble I see.  
Nobody knows but Jesus.  
Nobody knows the trouble I see.  
Glory, Hallelujah!

The words speak of the present and that which is to come. Many African slaves were only able to endure the suffering of slavery because they knew the present power of God's love and the future glory that awaited them. What Christians know about the future inspires us to act appropriately in the present. However, as we see from current events, the future glory is not to be used as an anesthesia or opiate to make us passively accept pain and injustice. Rather, the love of God is so powerful

that it sustains us through suffering and empowers us to act according to our faith for positive change for all people.

We are justified by faith and what Paul wants us to have faith in is Christ's dying for the ungodly. This act proves God's love for us because it is done "while we were still weak," "yet sinners," guilty and not in right relationship with God. Therefore, Christ's death makes plain the unmerited favor of God toward sinful people. Truly, God's love is amazing; so amazing that God would allow Jesus to die in our place, to save us, to declare us righteous before God. Thank God for God's amazing grace...God's amazing gift...God's amazing love! **Diane Givens Moffett**

None need fear our salvation based on our works and being good enough. Paul reminds us we are justified by faith! Thank God!

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