

Justified by Faith

Romans 5:1-11

According to Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology, justification is the declaring of a person to be just or righteous. It is a legal term signifying acquittal. Paul insists that people are not justified by what they themselves do. Justification is not the result of the infusion of new life into people, but comes about when we believe according to Leon Morris.

As I have been thinking about our scripture and of what belief and faith in Jesus is all about, it has been brought home to me in my work, especially in the last 5 weeks as I have done intakes for persons wanting their taxes done for free. In late December the mayor of Detroit asked staff of non-profits to help low to moderate workers to get their taxes done for free. After the meeting I asked if I could do the tax preparation intakes and it was arranged that I have the training for the task. I assumed I would get customers from our programs that help people get competitive jobs, but most of my people have come from programs that serve people living with developmental disabilities or chronic mental illness. So let me tell you what I have learned and a little about the people I have served.

First I learned that by virtue of being a citizen of this country, or a citizen of the state of Michigan, or a resident of the city of Detroit, you may be entitled to a tax return, even if you did not work. This might be a home heating credit, or a child tax credit, or you may have low wages and are entitled to all your federal taxes back because of earned income tax credits.

I met Demetrius who is developmentally disabled. He works about 10 hours per week and he is getting a tax refund. He has been hoping that the

check will arrive in time for his birthday on the 23rd of this month. He is entitled to a tax return because he is a citizen and a worker, in the same way he are members of the kingdom of God, not because of our great works or righteousness, but because of faith in what Jesus has done for us! We are justified and declared righteous because of God's great love for us.

Arenia paid \$388 to get her taxes done last year, which really made me angry. Her refund was less than \$1,000, but some tax preparation firm didn't think it unethical to charge so much. Arenia suffers from mental illness, and her family does not feel that she needs good credit, so that have purchased a house, a car, and utilities in her name. But the state of Michigan says that she is entitled to her tax return because she is a citizen. It does not matter how her family sees her, she is a citizen, in the same way that we are citizens of the kingdom of God. We have justification, reconciliation, salvation, love, peace and hope, through faith in Jesus Christ.

LaToya came from a female empowerment program to help women with children get their lives back together. When I asked LaToya how she was going to use her substantial tax refund she said she had some outstanding tickets that she would pay, so she and her young children could get back on their feet. I was excited that she had internalized that she had been taught in her classes and was taking responsibility for her behaviors. Like her, we have an opportunity to help others because of what God has done for us. We are citizens and children of God. We may have suffering, but it will build endurance, and our endurance will build character, and our character will give us hope and peace.

Sandra did her taxes a few weeks ago. However when the return was e-filed we discovered that someone had already filed their taxes using her Social Security number. Someone forgot she was a citizen and entitled to all

the benefits of citizenship. It does not matter our occupation or how much money we make we are citizens. God never forgets we are citizens of the kingdom! We are seen through eyes of love, with all the rights and privileges of all citizens of the kingdom. We are seen justified, righteous, saved. The good news is that Sandra will get her tax refund because she are doing an affidavit that the earlier taxes were filed without her knowledge or permission. Sandra is a citizen.

Paige is a 22-year old young woman who learned about the free tax preparation from an acquaintance. She is currently working two jobs and going to school. When she came to pick up and sign her return I asked what she would do with the money. She said she would put aside a portion to start a scholarship fund for young people who have been in foster care like herself. She explained that it had been difficult going from family to family and not having a family of her own. She wants to make life better for those who are coming behind her! I was moved and humbled by her generosity. We who have been saved and justified by God's grace can learn from Paige's example.

People with whom I have done the tax preparation intake tell me I am so nice, and the staff thanks me every time they talk with me. It is like they are invisible citizens. They are like us having justification by faith, they are citizens by virtue of their birth and the fact that have a Social Security card!

Paul's understanding of justification by faith is about relationships. Presumably from his own experience, Paul developed this understanding negatively—law is unable to bring us into a joyful, empowering, free, and full relationship with God. No matter how sincerely we try, we always fall short of fulfilling the requirements of the law. There are always things we

have done we should not have done and things we have not done we should have done.

In truth, the very effort to seek perfection leaves us isolated, focused on self, and often torn with feelings of guilt. We need another way, a way that does not depend on our efforts. Through Christ, God reveals the nature of the divine love—a self-giving love that suffered death on the cross for us, even though we do not deserve this love. Through faith we understand perfection is not necessary for us to be loved by God. We do not need to justify ourselves. We are loved, and that is all the justification we need. We are in relationship with God, not because of our efforts, but because of God's loving action. Through faith we enter into that relationship and discover peace, hope, and perseverance, even in suffering.

Paul Tillich, interpreter of Paul's theology of justification by grace through faith, in our day has articulated the theology powerfully. We are accepted by God although being unacceptable according to the criterion of the law, and all we must do is accept this acceptance. Just as we are unable to earn God's love, so we cannot earn another's love. The psychology of attraction is very complicated, but the emotional and motivational commitment of love—the willingness to set aside our own needs to respond to the needs of the other—is always a gift. While hurtful actions—be they betrayal of trust, physical violence, emotional neglect, or isolation—can destroy a relationship, what creates the relationship is acceptance of the other with his or her character defects as well as with those aspects of personality that are attractive and represent strengths. All love is a free gift—unearned, undeserved. To receive love, the beloved can only accept it gratefully.

Understanding relationship as gift is important on at least three levels: identity, motivation, and unity. Each stage of life from adolescence to retirement presents us with questions regarding purpose and meaning for our life. When we seek to affirm personal worth through works—making money, finding security, being honored and admired, or accomplishing important goals—the result is likely to include isolation, failure, shame, and even despair. Such a basis for personal identity is fraught with risk.

On the other hand, when we discover an identity based on a loving God—that whatever happens, we are beloved by the very Heart of the universe, that nothing can separate us from God, and that nothing is more valuable than being a child of God—then our personal identity is founded on our humanity. Then we do not judge personal worth by comparison with others. Failure and shame become symptoms of misplaced values—idols to be set aside. Motivation becomes directed toward legitimate needs of others and society instead of the quest to establish our personal worth.

Because personal ego is less important, we become free to take risks, to be bold, to dream of God's healed creation and pursue it. Recognizing that our fundamental identity rests in the value of our humanity also means recognizing the worth of every other human being as well. Openness to others becomes easier, empathy toward others is a natural response, and willingness to know and be known binds us together.

Grace, not works, is what brings us life. One of the great insights contained in this understanding is the recognition that external conditions are of secondary importance. We may experience being loved and loving in the hospital, in unemployment, and even in emotional pain. This should not reduce the desire to end suffering in this world, especially suffering caused

by human action, but it does mean even in hardship we can know the life of grace. That is good news. **Ward B. Ewing**

Paul said we are children of God, citizens of the heavenly kingdom, have peace, character, endurance and hope; made justified by faith alone. What good news!

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