

Justification: Grace as a Gift

Romans 3:21-31

Discipleship Essentials - Part Two: Understanding the Message of Christ

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Sunday, April 15, 2007

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Over the past few weeks, it's been fun for me to hear about the travels of many people in our church over the time of spring breaks. However, my family didn't take a spring break per se this year. We had a different kind of adventure. It all started about a month ago at the dinner table when my five-year-old son, Peter, mentioned that Dusty, beloved pet guinea pig of his preschool classroom, needed a family to take her home during the week that preschool was out of session. Evidently, Dusty is a she pig. "Just one week!" he pleaded to me and to his mother.

Now, I had a bad experience with a guinea pig in my childhood that ended up involving a lot of trips to the vet, but I don't want to talk about that too much this morning. Suffice it to say that I wasn't too excited about this proposal to the family. So I told Peter--with love, mind you--that Dusty would need to find another home, another family to stay with. Sometimes fathers just have to lay down the law, even if the kids aren't too happy about it. And nothing more was said about this for the next couple of weeks--until a Thursday night, the very night that spring break began; and, after meetings at church, I entered our dark home after everyone else was already asleep.

I carefully found my way to my reading chair in the family room, turned on the lamp near the chair, and picked up the paper to read. Suddenly, from a dark corner of the room, on the other side of the desk, I heard a [rustling sound]. It was the kind of sound that you are sure you recognize. It was too big a sound to be a mouse. So I began to imagine: in that dark corner of the room was a great big rat.

I tiptoed across the room in the dark to switch on the overhead light, my heart pounding, not wanting to provoke that hairy rodent, took a deep breath, and illuminated the room. And, my friends, there was a rodent in my house; and it was hairy, but it was also kind of cute: white fur, light brown patches around soulful, timid eyes--looking at me with fear.

I had laid down the law, as fathers need to do, but the greater power in my household, the power of grace--and I'll let you guess who that was--had somehow secured the final say.

And my heart was opened again to heartbreak. I took a startled and shaking Dusty out of her cage, held her on my lap on the family room floor, and assured her with the words of angels that this was a loving house after all, saying, "Do not be afraid." And, friends, Dusty did return to the preschool last Monday, but summer break is upon us, and I have lost all authority in my house--so, who knows?

Let us pray: Almighty God, you have first established your covenant with your people through your promise to Abraham and Sarah and by the establishment of your law through Moses that has formed the very identity and mission of those you call your children. Yet, we routinely fail to honor your covenant with us and too often fail to follow your holy law. Despite all this, you still gather us as your children by your covenant of grace through Jesus Christ. So, draw us close to your grace now through Jesus, in this moment, so that we might be moved to share his grace with the world. Amen.

The Apostle Paul has a unique style of writing that can take some time for us to get our heads and hearts around. He writes about the mysteries of God. He is a master of holding two seemingly contradictory ideas together as one. Yet, he still satisfies us in the end that he is truly conveying God's Word to the world.

His teachings on law and grace in his letter to the Romans are a very good example of this. Here we see Paul working to find a way as a Jewish Christian to welcome Gentile Christians into the early Christian church, into the fold. For most of his life, the law had been his unifying force. That's how people of faith were brought together in Paul's world before Jesus.

To be a child of God meant observing God's law, not only out of obligation but also out of a personal sense of communal identity. To be a child of God meant observing the Sabbath and keeping it holy, worshipping the Lord alone, honoring father and mother--and then by extension following the communal laws that were based on the Ten Commandments elsewhere in the Old Testament.

But as the Apostle Paul, a Jewish follower of a Jewish Messiah, traveled out of Israel to share the Gospel among Gentiles, he immediately confronted the question "What makes a child of God?" Can non-Jews be part of this Jesus movement? Can someone who doesn't observe the laws of Moses faithfully be saved? Must there be circumcision? Must they worship in a synagogue to follow Jesus? Is the law still relevant?

Have you ever had the experience of asking someone to choose between two options, but they don't take the bite? This is a routine part of my life and existence. Do you want to go to the museum or the hot dog stand? Yes. Do you want to walk around the Tidal Basin to see the blossoms or do you want to go on the paddle boat? Yes. Do you want to go to Macaroni Grill or to Noodles and Company? Yes, yes.

Well, clearly here, Paul wants his cake and eat it too. In verse 28, he writes, "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works proscribed by the law." Then, look at Verse 31: "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means. On the contrary, we uphold the law."

Here Paul is saying yes to grace and to the law. He's saying yes to God's free gift of grace through faith in Jesus; it's this grace that makes us right in the eyes of God even when we aren't all right. But he's also saying yes to the law, recognizing that the commandments of the law still function to mark our path for faithful living, showing us how to honor God and neighbor. That is how Jesus summarized the law to those who asked him.

The commandments come down to this. He said, "Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your strength. And love your neighbor as yourself." And we might have high hopes that, if we truly fulfill God's law in our lives, without fail, God and neighbor, loving God and neighbor, then maybe, just maybe, maybe we'd be right with God. We'd be justified.

Look at Verse 23. What does Paul say? ". . . all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Whether Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free--without exception--everyone.

So, while we might hope for the possibility of justification through our obedience to the law, we are finally called to lean into God's grace by our need for grace--our need that God carries in his heart for us and always has. We are justified by his grace as a gift to us, a gift that Jesus has earned for us, in our stead. This we accept, yes--by faith. We are justified by grace, and the law still guides us.

John Calvin recognized this and reminded Christians that the law still serves three purposes, since labeled as mirror, guard, and guide. You'll find those three words this morning in your bulletin under the "Brunch Bunch" questions, so brilliantly prepared by my colleague Junior McGarahan.

The law is a mirror to us, helping us see ourselves as we truly are. Through the law, we recognize how we fall short of God's will, and we recognize our need for forgiveness.

Second, the law is a guard for human society as a whole, informing human laws whose best intent is to help us respect and honor one another. Are there any lawyers in the house who would like to comment on that?

And, third, the law is a guide to us as believers--a guide to us. The law guides us as we follow Jesus in how to, as a pastor I know often says: "...how to cause God joy." How to cause God joy. The laws of God guide us in our love for God and neighbor, so when we observe the law we do so, not out of stern obligation, but rather to cause God joy.

For followers of Jesus, the law is a mirror, a guard, and a guide.

Does grace by faith make the law irrelevant? No. We uphold the law so we might cause God joy. But we accept that we are made right in the eyes of God: we are justified--out of Jesus' perfection, not our own.

One of the really fun aspects of being in the first year of a new pastorate is going through everything for the first time in your new church--the first All-Church Retreat, the first Christmas Eve service, the first Easter. And it's been fun for me to walk into our narthex on Saturday mornings through the seasons of the church year and enjoy some fellowship with our teams of volunteers who on Saturday mornings are often there preparing the elements for communion or arranging flowers for our sanctuary.

A week ago Saturday, the day before Easter, was an especially busy time, as you can imagine, here at National Presbyterian because of all the preparations for the Easter season.

After I spent some time in fellowship with the folks of our flower ministry, I came into the sanctuary here, walked in the back, down the center aisle, and saw one of our staff members raised high up on a power lift--we call it the "cherry picker"--all the way up to this cross so she could place that white drapery there to replace the black drapery that had been there on Good Friday for that service. And after she got down to inspect her work, I complimented her on her work and asked her: "Has a pastor ever gone up on that lift?" "No," she replied. "Go for it."

And, without a call to the NPC insurance agent, without checking with the legal committee, I impulsively stepped into that cherry picker on my own, secured the gate, and pushed the button to begin my ascent.

But, folks, I was not even halfway up to that cross before I looked around me, and this whole room began to move--or, should I say, spin. I have never had a problem like that with heights. But there was something in the perspective from that lift, on my way up to that cross, that made me realize I was not going to reach my intended destination. This pastor was humbled and had to push the "Down" button, and return to his office, embarrassed that he couldn't make it. I didn't have what it takes.

And since that time, a few kind souls who witnessed my humility assured me they would not tell a soul. But I chose to share that very true story with you this morning because I believe it was God's poetic way of reminding me this Easter season that I do not have what Jesus has.

I need Jesus to reach that cross. I cannot reach it on my own. And I do not have the power to transcend it. The power of the resurrection does not rest in me; it rests in Jesus. And, friends, may I be so bold this morning as to say to you: You also lack that power. None of us has sufficient power to save ourselves or anyone else, but Jesus does.

"The righteousness of God," writes Paul, "has been disclosed through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We are now justified by his grace as a gift." As a gift.

Friends, do not be afraid: accept that gift. Believe in the One who has that power--and you shall be saved.

Let us pray: Draw us close to your grace, dear Lord, so we might find salvation in your Son, your Son who has the power over death and over sin. In Him we have true hope. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.