

**"The Doorman"**

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Any time Paul starts with the word, "Therefore," one should go back and read the previous verses. Paul has just described the relationship between Abraham and God and he now describes how followers of Jesus represent a continuation of that relationship in a new context.

Romans 5:1-11

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

2 through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

3 Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;

4 perseverance, character; and character, hope.

5 And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die.

8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!

10 For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

11 Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."

## The Doorman

Last Sunday, we looked at the virtue of righteousness and how it stems from the heart of the law and not the letter of the law. We also touched on the meaning of justification, or the idea of being made right, made to fit. Today, we are going to take those topics a few steps further.

So, let's take the lid off this cookie jar and look deeper into it. Picture this conversation between two people:

“Are you a Christian?”

“Yes, I belong to a church and I attend.”

“Is that all?”

“Well, I believe in Jesus.”

“That's odd, I don't see you behaving like you do and I never hear you talking about it.”

“Well, I do try to be better. Let me see, I have sort of a mental list of the things I have done to make me a better Christian, to make me right...”

Exactly – The things I have done....

And off we go, listing the things that WE seem to do that make us feel more justified in the eyes of others and the eyes of the world.

When I was stationed in Europe, a man I knew described how a friend of his looked when he set out to do a road tour in Italy, driving his newly acquired bright red Fiat Spider. He described the custom tailored clothes, the snap-brim cap, and the driving gloves. The top was down and his wife sat next to him with her hair blowing in the slipstream as the Italian countryside raced past them. The man concluded by saying of his friend, “Now that guy was *right!*”

For a brief time, that friend had his moment of justification. He was symbolically admired by the world, the envy of many. I know plenty of people, myself included, who would have traded places with him.

But justification that we try to create does not last long. In fact, we cannot justify ourselves at all in God's eyes. History tells us that Martin Luther was very worried about his own justification and so he worked at it, even to the

point of becoming a monk. He eventually realized that he could not attain being right with God by his own efforts. The result was the Reformation. Luther focused on what God has done, not what he had done.

So, what has God done? The first verse of our scripture today says we are justified by faith in God and it ties in with verses of chapter 4 to indicate that the justification comes from God. God loves us and gives us peace of mind. It is a gift; not a new gift, because it has always been there, unconditional, no strings attached. Neither works nor faith by itself justifies us because both of these things start with us. God's justification starts with God and brings changes in our relationship with Him. It changes us. It gives us reason to trust Him. Trust and faith have the same meaning. Both words must have the correct object to have the meaning we are speaking of. It is not academic nor intellectual, it is just trust in God.

That sounds simple, but, this kind of trust is not just plain and simple. Turning away from things of the earth and then facing God with trust is not easy. Where do we find the strength to do this? Humans are a stubborn lot, we really are. Often it takes a 2X4 to get our attention. And when we see God through the lens of the Holy Spirit, things start to fall into place and God's love begins to make sense. A great part of that new-found strength for trusting is right here, in church; from the person beside you, in front of you, across the room, wherever you may look in this place of worship. Here we are in communion with each other, in the same boat, gaining strength from believing in the same Savior, knowing we are not alone in our beliefs. And every day, we should pray, "I believe, help me in my unbelief." Then we can focus on positive aspects of God's love and not go on agonizing over justification in the world.

And now we stand in grace, according to Paul. When I first read these words, I imagined someone in hip boots, standing in some marshy water, surrounded by swamp. We said grace meant gift, but the way it is used here, standing in grace, I think it also means status. I think it is referring to our status as the recipient of a gift; the guest of honor at a surprise banquet; the center of love and attention.

I am always amazed, when I explore the measure of grace given to us, just how special we are to God. I think God knows how hard it is to be a

Christian, but in spite of it, He will not settle for lukewarm faith or mediocre loyalty. We are special, because we stand in grace, immersed in it up to our necks and much is expected of us.

Paul mentions a sequence that starts with suffering, then endurance, character, and finally hope. What drives this chain of events? Look in Matthew at the beatitudes. You could sum up the first half of all the beatitudes by saying, "Blessed are the suffering," and then you realize just how important grace is. None of the beatitudes could be fulfilled without grace. God's gift to us is to give us the means by which to fulfill His purpose. Grace is the driver.

And the sequence ends with hope. Hope for what? It takes us back to the word peace. I think he means peace of mind. Hope and peace go together like a pair of gloves. We are at peace in knowing, having hope, that God's purpose for us will be realized. The purpose is met in that we were reconciled through the sacrifice of Jesus.

The word, 'Reconciled,' brings back a distant memory. I once worked for an employer who had a crusty, old bookkeeper, a woman that no one argued with because she was the keeper of the checkbook. I heard her mention often how she had to reconcile the checkbook. One day, I caught her at a rare, more pleasant moment and asked her to explain that to me. Impressed with my question, she went into great detail about how she added up columns of deposits and checks written, both those processed and those still pending and made sure that it matched the balance in the ledger. If it didn't match, she fixed it. On that particular day, I was about to ask her how she 'fixed' it and the boss walked by and pulled me aside. He told me not to ask too many questions about how she 'fixed' things. Like I said, it was in my younger, naive years.

But, now I have a better understanding of God's reconciliation of us through Christ. God's purpose will be served and God has 'fixed' the situation so that we have the potential to match that purpose. Notice, I said potential. Not forced.

So, what part does Jesus play in all this? Our scripture tells us that at the right time, when we were still powerless, Jesus died for all the wretched people on earth, including those who had sent him to the cross.

What does Paul mean, 'At the right time?'

There was once a Little League baseball coach who had the most losing team of their league. They were halfway through the season and had yet to win their first game. Many of the players talked about quitting. In their poor, downtrodden, miserable little lives, they could not see themselves as winners.

So, the coach decided to do something for them. He called for a team meeting at his house. Instead of practice, practice or hard-nose pep talks, he surprised them with a pizza party. There was food galore, video games, music, party favors – you name it, he thought of it. The kids on the team were shocked! They thought the team meeting at the coach's house was for them to be chastised and scolded. But a party? They knew they didn't deserve it. But, the coach did have one motivational speech. He simply told the kids how much he thought of them. He had something to say about each individual player and they realized that this coach really cared. Self-esteem, which had been at rock bottom now went through the roof. They left loving their coach and loving each other. They came together as a team and started winning. But, winning was just a secondary prize. The real prize was how they felt about their coach and about themselves.

I started this story talking about timing. Would the coach's pizza party have had as much an impact earlier in the season? Maybe if they had won even a few games? Probably not. He let them hit their lowest point and showed that he still loved them for who they were, not for how they played ball. So, this party was not a reward for athletic prowess and they certainly could not say they deserved it. They could not even take partial credit for the coach's decision to throw a pizza bash for them.

When Paul speaks of the 'right time,' did he mean when we were at our lowest point? Would you agree that crucifying the very incarnation of God on a wooden cross was our lowest point? To say that God, by way of Jesus, loved us at our lowest point, at the peak of our hostility toward Him, shows the full extent of His love. If God had shown His love somehow at a

point where we were just moderately sinful, that would have shown only part of God's love and leave room for us to claim some of the credit. No, we had to be at a point where evil was at its strongest and all the credit went to the Heavenly Father for justifying us, for reconciling us. The door to grace, that unconditional gift, opens when we look at the cross and ask ourselves like Sir Alec Guinness said in *Bridge over the River Kwai*, "My God, what have I done?"

And God was there – with His grace, His gift, no strings, and no conditions. It says we are worth more than a pizza party, we are worth dying for! You are worth dying for!

The scripture also uses the word, 'powerless' – 'when we were powerless,' is when Christ died. Paul is pointing out the false power of sin. Little did they know, those who would crucify Christ, that what they were doing would be undone in three days. Powerless because our clear view of God was blotted out by the brokenness of the world; broken because of us.

Frederick Buechner says the Gospel is bad news before it is good news. Humankind are sinners and that is tragedy enough. But it gets worse. Worse when we see that so much of humankind either does not know of its sin or just does not care. The good news is we are loved in spite of that. Do I believe in fairy tales? Yes, to the extent that anything as evil as us can still be loved, yes, I believe in fairy tales.

And so, Paul tells us there is hope. Even at the cross where we killed God's Son, where we slew the goose with the golden egg, where, in our ignorance and arrogance, we rejected the lifeline thrown to us in our storm of sinfulness, there was hope – because that's all that was left!

Hope always refers to something in the future. The Glory of God is humankind attaining our ultimate purpose. At the cross, there was hope that the Glory of God would be realized and that hope continues today. That's what we ask for when we say, "Thy kingdom come." God is patient and His grace is unwavering!

Paul continues by mentioning "rejoice in our sufferings." He doesn't mean 'because of' our sufferings, but 'during,' since we know there is light at the

end of the tunnel. Think of his word of suffering as 'life's challenges.' Challenges give us a sense of purpose, of right and wrong, and a reason to hope. Challenges help us see our boundaries and our direction. Without losing any meaning, he could have said, "I know the road is going to be rough, but there's something waiting for you at the end."

Paul is speaking of reality. We sometimes confuse reality with concepts and theories. God's love is neither concept nor theory. It is the ultimate reality; the ultimate truth. It is the fairy tale we can believe. Skeptics may say it's too good to be true. But, in reality, it's so good it has to be true!

A few weeks ago, at the academy awards, Viola Davis made a memorable speech when she accepted her award for best supporting actress. She said, of her fellow actors, that theirs is the only profession that makes an art form of living a life. I understand what she's saying and I wonder if she realizes that her words have just scratched the surface. It goes well beyond those in the performing arts. Life in its fullest is a Christian life.

In living a Christian life, we should find that those who are loved become more loving, those forgiven become more forgiving, the healed become the healers, and those who recognize and acknowledge grace become instruments of grace. These attributes should be practiced by Christians to the point that they become the art form of living a life. That is when heaven and earth meet and exchange a kiss, and Jesus stands at the door, holding it open for us. We have but to take that first step into eternal life.

It always starts with God's gift, God's grace, God's love.

Amen.