

## **“Through Faith Triumphant”**

**Psalm 5; Galatians 3:10-14**

August 20, 2023

Yesterday when we were eating at the Chicken Salad Chick, I was filling up my cup with soda and I flashed back to a memory from long ago. It was my very first date. Like, the first time I took a girl out. I was 15 years old. I remember that only because I didn't drive that night, my mom did. She dropped us off and I was going to call from the restaurant as we were getting done. So, it's my first date ever and we went to a restaurant I'd end up working at, Darryl's, a chain like Chili's but they didn't make it. Anyway, there I was on my first date ever. Can you guess how I was feeling? Nervous. I was really nervous. But we managed to get seated (it was a busy night and we had to wait a bit) and get our drinks ordered. That was going to be the problem, as it would turn out. We ordered Cokes and soon the waitress brought them out. Now remember, I'm nervous. And as a response, what do I do? Well, I end up drinking like a prodigious amount of Coke. I'm not kidding, I think I had like seven refills. It all went really well, to be honest. I was (mostly) pretty suave. But it was all undone in an instant. You see, when the waitress brought the bill over, there was a glaring problem. The total bill, even without a tip, was more money than I had brought. You see, unlike today, back then, refills cost you per fill up. And even though it was only like .75 cents, the volume of refills had thrown off my mental calculus of predicting the bill. Long story short – I actually ended up having to borrow money from my date to pay the bill. Now look, I was just 15 and this was my first date. I was mortified. But it reminds me. Always know what you're ordering and what it costs ahead of time. You don't want to get caught making a mistake like I did way back when.

Last week I mentioned a phrase that you hear a lot. I shared with you about being a relatively uneducated candidate in the Presbyterian Ordination process and hearing this phrase bandied about. We are “justified by grace through faith.” It seemed like all of the more knowledgeable candidates said that so I wanted to learn more about it. You know what? I've been studying all of the ins and outs of what that statement means and I continued to be astounded by the Biblical depth it conveys in just a few words. And while as I shared last week, you don't know everything about Christian theology in understanding it, if you do, you will have gone a long way into penetrating the depth of Christian belief.

Last week we talked predominantly about justification. *“Simply put, to justify is to declare righteous. Justification is an act of God whereby He pronounces a sinner to be righteous because of that sinner's faith in Christ.”* Chief to keep in mind that justification is a one-time act of GOD. It is not ongoing. Sometimes we do a disservice to the fullness of what being justified means. A lot of times, we collapse justification into mere forgiveness. And while being justified does mean that you are forgiven, it means far more than that.

There are really three dimensions to your justification. The first, as we just mentioned, is that in being justified by God, you are forgiven of your sins. This is a good thing, right? I mean, the one unmistakable truth of our lives is that we are sinners who stand in desperate need of forgiveness. But forgiveness, as I've said, is just one part of the whole. It's a good beginning, to be sure. Because I think there have been times where you've been forgiven but you remain unreconciled.

I had a best friend growing up. His name was David and we met in the fifth grade. We did lots of things together, living in the same neighborhood made it easy. I could walk to David's house and vice-versa. Ah, but somewhere around the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, a problem arose. You see, we both liked the same girl. Long story short, I promised not to ask her out and then, one day, I did. It was wrong, a betrayal. And David did forgive me. We hung out together in groups, didn't share cross words or anything. But something had changed. Although I was forgiven, that relationship wasn't reconciled.

In order to get at just how much more than forgiveness justification is, it helps us to look back at the story of the Prodigal Son. Now, again, the prodigal son is a parable told in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Luke. There, one of two son comes to his father and says, essentially, give me my share of the inheritance right now. Now look, this was a horrible thing to have even asked. It was like saying to your father, you're dead to me now, just give me what I want so I can be free of you.

Amazingly, the father out of his love for his son does exactly that. But we all know this story, don't we? The young man heads out on his own. Pretty soon, he's blown all of his father's wealth through

dissolute living. He sinks so low that he's reduced to feeding pigs as a day laborer. Even with that job, he's starving. He looks at the food that he's giving the pig and he's envious. It's then he has a notion. The servants do better than this at my father's house. I will return to him and beg for the right to be just a mere servant in my father's home. So, he sets off, returning from that far country. And as he sets foot at the far edge of his father's property, what should he see? The most amazing thing. For he sees his father at a run coming towards him. Now look, at that time, it was considered undignified for an older man to run, that was reserved for the young bucks. Yet here was the father, racing towards his homebound son. And the words of apology fall out of his mouth, the words of apology and begging for forgiveness. And how does the father reply? Is the young man reduced in his status? Surely that's the right outcome here, isn't it? The one where you have to be punished to learn your lesson. That's the way of the world, isn't it?

But what is God's way? The Father tells us. *"Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." And they began to celebrate.*"

Do you see? This isn't a picture of mere forgiveness. After all, the father could've said, "sure, be a servant" and been done with it. But that's not the nature of God's love for us. We are forgiven and reconciled back into full relationship with God the Father. And it gets better. To be justified is also to be saved. Paul tells us in **Romans 6:23** – *"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."* What Christ has accomplished for us is to save us from eternal death. He has transferred us from doom into eternal salvation. To be justified is to be forgiven, reconciled and saved. And it's all, according to the Bible, the free gift of God. That's what we mean when we say that we are justified by Grace. And lest we think we have any part of it, the next words permanently squelch that for us. For we are justified BY GRACE.

You know, the more and more I think about this thing grace, the more I am convinced that it is the most scandalous thing to the world's present sensibilities. On one level, we reject grace because it doesn't make sense in our transactionally-wired mindset. "There's no such thing as a free lunch" we're taught from a very early age on, aren't we? We're always on the lookout for deals that are too good to be true. Why? Because we've been burned. Everything has a cost in this world, that's what we think. So, we reject grace on the premise that it is foreign to our dominant belief systems.

Make no mistake about it, this is the same reason why some of the Christians in Galatian churches were led astray. Remember, these Judaizers were claiming that, after baptism, one had to follow the Jewish laws in order to stay in a state of grace. But that statement alone devalues grace which is most easily understood as a free gift.

But that's not entirely why I think grace is so undervalued right now. The deeper reason that grace is so undervalued right now is that to accept it necessarily means that we, ourselves, are somehow deficient. And that doesn't sit well with us, especially not these days. Consider these mantras of modernity: Believe in yourself. You are enough. You are worthy. You are the hero of your own story.

Megan Elling calls it "the self-esteem gospel" and she writes this – "The self-esteem gospel encourages people to believe in themselves, try harder, love themselves more, never give up, and prioritize themselves. These things are **all good things**. But the problem with that gospel is that it *fundamentally* encourages people towards *themselves* instead of *Jesus*. It puts good things in front of the best thing. The self-esteem gospel can be defined as a set of beliefs and principles that push you towards yourself, your desires, and your own effort & power, and make your happiness, freedom, and satisfaction the ultimate aim of life. **The Self Esteem Gospel tries to solve the human condition with encouragement to try harder.**

After all, is there anything the world around us tells us more frequently or more loudly than, "WE ARE SUFFICIENT." That somehow, somehow, we by ourselves possess everything necessary to succeed and thrive. Make no mistake about it, the world has drunk deeply from the wells of existentialism. We believe that we're all alone in this world and have to forge everything necessary for our survival and contentment.

It's the reason we've seen a sense of entitlement grow large. And listen to his from psychology today – "Entitlement—a personality trait driven by exaggerated feelings of deservingness and superiority—may lead to chronic disappointment, unmet expectations and a habitual, self-reinforcing cycle of behavior with dire psychological and social costs, according to new research by Case Western Reserve University." That means that the more and more we believe that somehow we are entitled to things simply because we're us, the more and more depressed and isolated from others we are becoming. And here's where it gets really worse. One of the things researched at the University of Chicago is showing is that there is a correlation between loneliness and self-centeredness. That is to say that the lonelier you are, the more self-centered you become.

Now remember something I mentioned about two weeks ago. That social media is strangely making us less social creatures. We are opting to spend time with our heads buried in our glass and plastic phones as opposed to spending actual time with people in the physical realm. This is isolating us which, in turn, is helping make us more self-centered. We are in a bad predicament, aren't we? The world is telling us that we are sufficient, entitled to everything.

Remember these words from **2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 3:5** – "*Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God.*" And grace is our ultimate reminder that we stand in deep need of something. What we need is God's Grace because, despite what the world around us says, we are sinners.

This, I think, is the most scandalous thing of all for any of us to realize. At one level, we know this about ourselves. That we don't always do things by the book. That we stray. This truth, when it does bubble up into our consciousnesses is always quickly shot down by a little voice inside our heads which says essentially, "yes, what I did here isn't good BUT it's nowhere near as bad as what other people do." Don't we all do that? We tell a lie to get around some social inconvenience and when we think, "that wasn't good" our first reaction is to grade ourselves verses someone whose done something far worse.

But the thing about sin is that it isn't graded on the curve. All sin is abhorrent to God. **Psalm 5:4** – "*For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you.*" That means to have sinned makes you a sinner and, apart from Christ's intervention, you could not stand with God. Now that's a difficult truth to swallow made more tough by the ongoing drumbeat of a world telling you that you're sufficient exactly how you are and entitled to everything.

Yes, you been justified and it's been by GRACE, the unmerited, unwarranted action of God through His Son Jesus Christ. So, on one level, grace is the gift of God. But the Scriptures say more about it than that. Just like justification is larger than just forgiveness, so too is grace bigger than just a gift, if you can imagine that.

What do I mean by that? Let's look at a couple of verses. **2 Corinthians 9:8** – "*And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.*" **2 Corinthians 12:9** – "*But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon Me.*" **1 Corinthians 15:10** – "*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.*"

So here we see, grace is a larger category than just a changed status with God. It also the power and energy of God to overcome, to accomplish, to excel, to succeed in God's work though the power of God's abiding Holy Spirit. John Piper puts it this way – "If once I thought of grace only as a character trait or a disposition or an inclination in the nature of God, which moved him to treat sinners better than they deserve — if that was my only conception, once upon a time — now, having seen all the texts, I broaden my understanding of grace as the Bible uses the term. Now I say, "Well, it appears that the word grace in Paul's use not only refers to God's character trait or disposition or inclination to treat people better than we deserve, but the word grace also refers to the action or the power or the influence or the force of this disposition, which produces real, practical outcomes in people's lives, like being sufficient for good deeds or enduring the thorn in the flesh or working harder than everybody else, which Paul says about his own apostolic work."

So, you've been justified by grace. But there is a mechanism, if you will, by which this all becomes active. By Faith. We will talk about that next week, what faith is, where it comes from and what it leads us to.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

## Scripture and Quotes

**Justification** - “Simply put, to justify is to declare righteous. Justification is an act of God whereby He pronounces a sinner to be righteous because of that sinner’s faith in Christ.”

**Luke 15:22-24** – “Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.”

**Romans 6:23** – “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

**Megan Elling** – “The self-esteem gospel encourages people to believe in themselves, try harder, love themselves more, never give up, and prioritize themselves. These things are ***all good things***. But the problem with that gospel is that it *fundamentally* encourages people towards *themselves* instead of *Jesus*. It puts good things in front of the best thing. The self-esteem gospel can be defined as a set of beliefs and principles that push you towards yourself, your desires, and your own effort & power, and make your happiness, freedom, and satisfaction the ultimate aim of life. **The Self Esteem Gospel tries to solve the human condition with encouragement to try harder.” This is a soul-crushing anti-gospel.**

**Entitlement** – “A personality trait driven by exaggerated feelings of deservingness and superiority—may lead to chronic disappointment, unmet expectations and a habitual, self-reinforcing cycle of behavior with dire psychological and social costs, according to new research by Case Western Reserve University.”

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