

“Mustard Seeds and Other Things”

Genesis 12:1-9; Galatians 3:10-14

August 27, 2023

There’s an old joke that you’ve probably already heard but it’s such a great entry point into this sermon that I hope you’ll forgive me for telling it. As the joke goes, a man hears a report of an impending flood in his area. All citizens are being called upon to evacuate the area. The man’s friends stop by his house and encourage him to leave but he has, “It’ll be fine, I have faith in God.” The friends, they worry but they depart, not wanting to get stuck in the flood themselves. Well, the rain comes and water starts accumulating on the roads and in the man’s house. Soon though, thankfully, a man with a boat comes by. “Let’s get out of here,” the new man says to which our old friend simply replies, “it’s okay, it’s all going to work out fine, I have faith in God.” So, again reluctantly, the man on the boat leaves. Guess what? The water keeps on rising. Finally, the man is forced to climb on top of his roof as the waters continue to rise. And even though there’s not much hope, along comes a helicopter. They dangle down a ladder for the man to climb up to safety. But this man, he looks up and says, you guessed it, “I’m going to be fine; I have faith in God.” And again, the rescuers leave the man there on the top of his house. Sadly, the man drowns. And as he gets to heaven, he’s really miffed. Meeting St. Peter at the gates, he’s steaming mad saying, “I placed my faith in God and God let me down.” To which Peter replies, “Who do you think send your friends, the boat and the helicopter?”

It’s a funny joke, you’ve probably already heard it though, it tends to make the rounds from time to time. But it’s ideal because it directs our thoughts and attention to the topic of this sermon. We’ve been talking the last couple of weeks about an important theological term that arises very naturally from all of Paul’s letters but particularly here, in Galatians. The phrase is “justified by grace through faith.” And while this phrase doesn’t contain all the necessary theology for a Christian, it’s a great starting point.

So, we talked a bit about what justification is. A lot of us were surprised to find that it encompassed far more than they thought. To begin with, we learned that justification is more than forgiveness. It begins there, doesn’t it. In Jesus Christ we are freed from our sins because we’ve been forgiven by God. And that’s pretty good to be forgiven. But as we talked about, there’s more to a relationship than that. Didn’t we all agree that one could be forgiven but not restored into full relationship again. That’s why the second element of our justification is so sweet. For not only are we forgiven of our transgressions, so too are we restored into full relationship with God the Father again. We looked at this through the parable of the prodigal son when the son returns, willing to work just as a servant. But instead, the finest garments are brought and the fattest calf is butchered for the celebrational party.

So, it’s forgiveness and restoration but justification is more than that. You’re also saved. From what? Eternal death. The resurrection of Jesus Christ shows us what we will be after our deaths. Fully resurrected into new, imperishable bodies. The great good news is that we transcend death, living eternally in the coming Kingdom of God.

So, in our justification, we’ve been forgiven, restored and saved. And how did it all happen? Well, it happened because of Grace. Grace is the unmerited, unearned favor of God. Grace is God’s choice to look at the sinner and instead of seeing all the vile acts and sins, choosing instead to see the precious face of His Son, Jesus Christ. You have been justified not by your own doing but through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. And we should never forget - This was a costly salvation.

It seems an odd thing to like but I really appreciate the season of Lent. During Lent, we’re brought face-to-face with the texts which show what happened in the Passion of Jesus Christ. There, we’ll remember, Jesus was arrested, tried by a kangaroo court and sentenced to death by the Romans. But before they killed Him, the mocked Him, beat Him, spat upon Him and even stabbed Him with a spear. And as bad as all of that was, perhaps the unkindest cut of all came from the fact that His friends and His followers all abandoned Him in His final hours. This is just to make the point that our justification was costly and all the work of it was borne by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 2:24 – *“He himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to*

righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed.” And it all happened because of what God did. Not a thing of our own. So, in a way, Grace is the pure gift of God. It’s a good way of thinking about grace. Something freely done for us. And, as we talked about last week, grace isn’t just a free gift. Looking at several citations from the other letters of Paul, we realized that grace is also an energy, an inclination to work to bring about God’s purposes here on Earth. That just as justification is more than forgiveness, so too is grace broader than just a free gift. There’s more to the story, as Paul Harvey used to say. Grace isn’t only the free gift of God, it’s also a power for living that comes directly from Him as well.

But now we arrive at the last part of our formula. We’ve been justified by grace through faith. But what is faith? More importantly, how is it different than hope? While the two words are very closely related, there is a difference. I think the best way to understand that difference is through an analogy.

Now, imagine that you’re at Niagara Falls. There, amazingly, is a man, a tight rope walker. You watch him go over the tightrope one time just by himself and you’re amazed. But the next thing you know, that tightrope walker takes a wheel barrow and scoots it across the line without missing a beat. That’s pretty amazing, right? The next thing you know, he does it with a person sitting in the wheelbarrow. You’re amazed by the feat. Then, the tightrope walker asks for volunteers. Do you go? Probably not, if we’re being honest. I’m not doing that. But, if I were, let me tell you something. I would need more than just hope that I was going to make it. I would need faith.

Biblically, faith is that knowledge that God will act according to His promises. However, the concept of faith can be misleading. Most people, when you talk about faith, think it means a wishful thought, a hope of some kind. For example, some would say, “I have faith that tomorrow is going to be a good day”. They don’t know, they are just hoping for the best. Sometimes we use faith to express our opinions. When we’re not really certain something is true but we want it to be. Example, “I have faith that I will go to heaven when I die.” We’re not sure but we hope it’s true. This is what the world accuses Christians of – blind faith. Those accusers feel we, as Christians, are just hoping that what we believe is true. They say we believe in a big myth. These kinds of faith have little impact in our daily lives. We say these things and go about our business.

However, true faith or Biblical faith consists of an object and a conviction. As believers we are committed to WHOM we believe. So, the trustworthiness of the OBJECT of our faith is of paramount importance. John Murray points out that there are three elements in faith.

You must have knowledge to have faith in God. The first element is knowledge. Now, there are those who think that knowledge and faith are opposites. They would say if you “know” something you don’t need faith. And if you don’t know something you just believe it to be true by “faith”. This is not true for the Christian. Having someone, Jesus, as the object of our faith, we need to *know* He is trustworthy. This will make more sense a little later. Knowledge is only the first element of faith.

The second thing he brings out is, true faith needs personal conviction. He says, “Faith recognizes the *personal* relevance of knowledge. It is being convinced in our own hearts of the significance of that truth for our lives.” It’s like knowing that certain drugs could kill you. Just knowing that doesn’t do anything for you unless you believe it to be true for you personally. But this still doesn’t constitute true faith.

Not only does my mind and heart have to be convinced but, third point: We must be willing to act on that knowledge and conviction. True faith is revealed by our actions. We will only act on things we really believe are true. We’ve all heard this illustration: If I tell you your car will blow up if you turn the key. You will either believe me and not turn the key or not believe me and turn the key. Your decision will be based on how trustworthy you believe I am.

Thankfully, the Bible gives us portraits of what faith looks like. Turning back in our Bibles to Genesis 12, we come to a highly significant event. Now it’s helpful to remember that this chapter comes immediately following the episode of the tower of Babel. There, if you’ll remember, humans tried to build a tower to topple heaven, to make God subordinate to us. It didn’t go so well for the humans, as the tower was toppled and God scrambled up all our languages. It’s in the ashes of that tower that God’s true plan begins to reveal itself. And God’s plan, as you might well imagine, it’s pretty big. It’s for the redemption of all people. And it’s going to begin with one family, one man really. And what an

unlikely man. A wandering Aramean named Abram. He'll be renamed by God himself Abraham. But, for the time being, he's just Abram. But God has plans for this man, big ones. He's going to have more descendants than granules of sand and through him the entire world will be blessed. And that point, God tells him what the plan is.

But in verse four of chapter 12, we get his response. *"So, Abram went, as the Lord had told him."* This is the response of faith. In the letter to the Hebrews, Abraham is talked about quite a bit. Hebrews 11:8-12 – *"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore, from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."*

Hebrews 11 looks closely at how faith manifested itself in Biblical characters. It's here that we get the closest thing to a definition from faith, right at the beginning of the chapter. The closest that the Bible comes to offering an exact definition is Hebrews 11:1 – *"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."* From this particular passage we see that the central feature of faith is confidence or trust. In the Bible, the object of faith is God and His promises.

A clear example of this is Abram's encounter with God in Genesis 15. In response to God's promise of countless descendants, Abram *"believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness."* (Gen 15:6). Commenting on this, the Apostle Paul writes, *"No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised."* (Rom 4:20-21). Thus, faith means putting your trust in God and having confidence that he will fulfill his promises.

Genuine Biblical faith expresses itself in everyday life. James writes that *"faith by itself, apart from works, is dead"* (James 2:17). *"Faith works through love to produce tangible evidence of its existence in a person's life"* (Gal 5:6). Put another way, *"the obedience that pleases God comes from faith"* (Rom 1:5; 16:26) rather than a mere sense of duty or obligation. There is all the difference in the world between the husband who buys his wife flowers out of delight and one who buys them simply out of duty.

Faith is so important because it is the means by which we have a relationship with God: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith"* (Eph 2:8). Faith is how we receive the benefits of what Jesus has done for us. He lived a life of perfect obedience to God, died to pay the penalty for our sinful rebellion against God, and rose from the dead to defeat sin, death, and the devil. By putting our faith in Him, we receive forgiveness for our sins and the gift of eternal life.

I want to close with a story about grace and how it can affect us. So, imagine if you will that there's a little girl and for reasons that aren't germane to the story, she's been adopted. But, strangely, every year this family that adopted her take their biological children to Disney World. That's a pretty fun place to for a kid, isn't it? Well, a couple of years pass of this. Each year, the little girl just assumes she's done something wrong to not be taken to Disney World. You can imagine how bad that felt. Seeing the pictures, hearing the stories of their trip. But, as circumstances would have it, her father emerges into her life again, fights and this little girl is returned to her Dad. And you know what? The very first thing he does is take the little girl to Disney World. It was while she was there, having the time of her life, that she uttered something to her Dad. She said she closed her eyes and snuggled down into her stuffed unicorn. After a few moments, she opened her eyes ever so slightly. "Daddy," she said, "I finally got to go to Disney World. But it wasn't because I was good; it's because I'm yours."

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