

We are now in week six of our sermon series on the book of Romans. In case there are some of you who are just now joining us, or might have missed a few, or who would just like to put today’s passage in context, we should maybe do a little recap of what Paul has been saying up ‘til now. I promise I’ll be brief. In fact, I’d just like to direct your attention back just a few pages to a single verse that, I think, sums up the entire book of Romans to this point. Turn with me to Romans 3:23-24. *There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

That’s it in a nutshell, the Gospel... the Good News. God’s grace. We didn’t deserve it. We couldn’t earn it. There was no way to win it, or buy it. There was no way for us to get it. There was no reason we should have it at all. But against all reason, God chose to freely give the gift of life through his only son, Jesus the Christ; a gift that came through his blood freely (though not without cost) given for us, a gift that for Jesus meant the cross. It’s a fairly straightforward message. Of course Paul has to spend some time fleshing it out, giving some examples and explaining things a bit, but that is the basic message. In fact, it’s the basic message of the Gospel. And it leads us to today’s passage, beginning with the “therefore.”

I was taught that when you encountered a “therefore” in scripture, you should spend some time figuring out what it is there for. It’s one of those phrases that lets you know “what follows is important.” That all that stuff that went before was pointing to something.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith (Paul can’t help himself... he just HAS to mention that justified through faith bit one more time) *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we **now** stand.*

Because of God’s grace, we can be at peace. Shalom peace. This means more than just a cease-fire with God. This is the kind of peace that passes all understanding, the kind of peace that can change every other aspect of our lives. It’s the kind of peace that changes your life so radically that no matter what follows, you can face it with confidence. It’s the kind of peace that comes from knowing that God is with you, still pouring out His grace on you today, right now. Because God’s grace wasn’t just a one shot deal that happened a few thousand years ago when God the Father sent Jesus the Son to live with us, to walk with us and to die for us so that he could break death open when he rose from the grave. I mean that was an amazing gift, but God didn’t just dust off the divine hands and say, “Whew! Glad that’s done with, see you all someday at the end of time!”

God is still pouring out his love on us. God still passionately desires us, wants good for us, wants to shower us with grace. Like the sea pounding against the shoreline, God is still reaching out to us with His grace right now, unceasingly pounding against our lives. With every beat of our heart God is saying "I love you. I love you, I love you, come walk with me" over and over and over again. And when we are truly aware of that, when we are aware of how much this God wants us to be with Him, to walk with Him and when we start to get to know this God who loves us so, there is nothing that this world can bring that can take away the peace.

And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. 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.

Now this is not to say that Paul thought suffering was great, or that he went looking for it. (Though he certainly found his share of it.) But suffering of any kind did not rob Paul of his surety in Jesus Christ. I was reading the book of Acts last week, and read the account of Paul's preaching in Lystra. He was having a good impact there in the marketplace, but some of his opponents took exception with him and decided to have him stoned. They pelted him with rocks until they were pretty sure he was dead, then dragged him out of the city and left him lying in the dirt. The bible says that when the disciples came and gathered around him, they found that he was still alive, and went back into the city. The next day, beaten and bruised, Paul left town. And this was just one of many of Paul's "adventures."

Paul's life wasn't much fun, but whatever adversity he faced just served to strengthen his will. They'd threaten him, beat him, slander him, lock him up, and ultimately execute him, but the evil he saw just reminded Paul of the importance of his mission to spread the love of God. If people are trying to kill you, I suppose it can be taken as a good indication that they might need Jesus in their lives. That's the hope that Paul lived in, and it is the hope he says we can live into too.

Really, what is the absolute worst the world can threaten us with? Nuclear missiles, armies? Please, God's going to turn spears into pruning hooks, swords into plowshares... in our modern sense those missiles will be fertilizer in the garden of God. He's going to break open the tanks and use them as flower-pots. War just won't be an issue anymore, that's a promise. What shall we fear... age, disease, infirmity? No way! This body can be broken, true, but the body God will give me won't scratch, dent, rust, sag, creak, weaken or break. That's a promise. What is there to fear? Kings, Generals, Tyrants? My King is king of the universe! All creation bows before him; even the demons of Hell trembled when they saw him coming. He's the Lord of Life. Hell couldn't stop him, death couldn't hold

him back and the grave couldn't keep him down. He will roll up this earth like an old carpet and spread out a feast for his people that will make the best this world has to offer look no better than crumbs in the carpet. His presence is promised; his care is assured; his love is uncompromised. We have nothing to fear and everything to look forward to because God walks with us. That's the promise of the gospel.

Now Paul goes on to (I think) one of the more amazing parts of this amazing message; God's timing. When did God choose to offer this grace through Jesus? At what point did God choose to lay out the riches of heaven and say, "This is for you?"

You see just at the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Let's take just a moment to go down memory lane. Close your eyes and think back. What is the absolute worst thing you have ever done in your life? Do you remember it? I'm sure some of you have led better lives than I, so it might take you a minute to think of something, so I'll tell a little story for the rest of us who came up with something all too quick. The story goes that both Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Mark Twain at different times played the same practical joke. They both sent anonymous telegrams to respected men they knew. The telegrams read simply "All is discovered. Flee at once!" Within 24 hours all of these men had packed up and left the country. We aren't perfect, and (if we are honest with ourselves) we know it. Think of yourself at your lowest and most undeserving. That's when God chose to send Jesus Christ for you. That's God's timing.

God doesn't wait until you are in a position to be good. God doesn't wait until He is sure to get a good return from His investment in your life. God doesn't wait until you can be of help in your own salvation, you know...until you can pull your own weight. God chooses the very moment in which you are the most lost, the most undeserving, the most helpless and at that moment gives you the greatest gift there ever was, is or ever will be... the life of His Son. More than that, says Paul, if God loved us enough to pay that price for us then, at that moment, when we were actually God's enemies, don't you think he'll love us all the more now that we are his children.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! 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! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

This is really good news. This is really, really good news. This is the Gospel message. We didn't earn it, we didn't deserve it, but while we were at our worst God gave His Son to die for us so that we could have life and peace and hope. That's the basic Gospel message. That's the good news.

Now here's the bad news. Or at least here's the challenge.

How many of you have heard this message before? Pretty much all of you. That part's not actually the bad news. Actually, I guess I should ask the question differently. How many of you had never heard that Gospel message until this morning? Anyone? See, this is what (for me at least) is disturbing. We have an entire world that is broken. A world that is terrifying and sinful and lost. A world that is, right now, in so many ways, opposed to God. And we also have a message that is meant for them, right now, for them. But they're not here to hear it.

I would really like to think that somehow people had a tough time deciding whether they would stop in at McDonalds this morning or come in to spend the time with us at church. I'd like to imagine that they agonized over the choice... "I would really like to hear that fantastic, brilliant, handsome young preacher over at Westminster, but this is really the only morning when we can treat ourselves to a sausage McBiscuit, and I've so been looking forward to it... oh what to do? Well, the McBiscuit does have cheese..." (some might say so does the pastor...) But I'm afraid the reality of the situation is that most people didn't suffer any angst at all over their morning choices. In fact, for most people the church never entered their mind as a choice at all. The statistics would say that on a given Sunday 40% of people will seek out a family of faith to worship with. The reality is that if 40% of people in Medford (not even counting the surrounding communities) went to church, all the churches in the valley couldn't hold them.

Friends, the church in North America (maybe even the church in the Western World) is becoming increasingly irrelevant. We're not even an option for so many of the people around us. Here we sit with the words of life in our hands, waiting for the world to burst through our doors and fall to their knees in gratitude, but the world drives on by, oblivious. This is the bad news of the Gospel. As good as the good news is, it stands in desperate need of, well, someone to report it. We will wait for an awful long time before we hear Katie Kurick give us a mention on the evening news. It's just not going to happen.

So here we sit with the words of life, with a world that stands in desperate need of it and with a profound disconnect between the two. What do we do? I spent this last week in Nashville with a group of very intelligent pastors, reading books by very intelligent people trying to figure out that very tricky problem. There aren't any easy answers, but there is a sort of simple answer. In a nutshell, we need to get out more.

By and large, the church in North America has taken an “If we Build it, they will come” approach, and we have built it! Right now, we have an impressive array of programs, structures, resources and buildings. We have the well trained staff, and the best in technology for communication. And yet, we seem to be increasingly disconnected from the communities we live in, isolated and insulated from a dying world. And the simple answer is that we, each one of us, needs to spend time talking with people outside our Christian communities. We need to search out those who have not heard the good news of Jesus Christ, and, quite simply share it.

There is a world out there that does not know how deeply God loves them. They cannot hear the news without someone to show God’s love in person. They will never walk through the front doors of our church. They will never deserve that love, they can never earn it, they can never find it by themselves, but God has chosen to love them. I have to think that this is God’s timing... that God has called us for this day, God has given us the words of life, and now sends us out with it.

It doesn’t have to be complicated. Yesterday I got an email from Junxi Zhang. He is a college student I met last week in the airport in Nashville. I had to wait in baggage claim for about an hour for my ride to arrive, and noticed him sitting there. So I simply said hello. It was as if a flood gate had been opened. He had been sitting in baggage claim for almost 12 hours, and I was the first person to say hello. He had just arrived from China and feared that his school had forgotten he was coming. He hadn’t eaten or slept in two days. We talked while we waited together, and I tried, unsuccessfully, to help him get in touch with his school. I didn’t preach. I didn’t “rescue” him. I didn’t have to. When it was time for me to leave he embraced me several times while we were saying goodbye. “Thank you, thank you, thank you. God bless you,” he said. It doesn’t have to be complicated, but I think it DOES have to be out there, and it does have to be US, making the greatest news ever, real to a world that needs it.