

Join us, if you can, in reading this with your family and praying at 10:15 on Sunday, April 12, 2020.

Justified by Faith and Reconciled to God

Dear First Southern Baptist Church family,

I hope you are well this morning. I want to remind you that last week we talked about how God has provided his sufficient grace to meet us in all of our weakness. This is a necessary reminder, again, because we are weak and fragile. Even this Easter morning, we find ourselves in circumstances that can be overwhelming and are far out of our control. Yet, God is not shaken. God is not anxious. God is in control. He sits on his throne and all those who believe in Jesus can find rest for their world-weary souls in his presence, his loving-kindness, his sovereignty, and his all sufficient grace. This morning, as we consider this, as well as the resurrection of Jesus that we celebrate on Easter, I want us to answer with Scripture the question, “How does someone have that kind of assurance through a relationship with God?” Also, as we’re thinking about that, we’ll see how those who believe in Jesus can rest in God’s all-sufficient grace in our weakness, and what all-sufficient grace even means. To consider these things, we will turn to Romans 5:1-11. It’s important for us to take a brief look at the content of Romans 1-4, the context of our passage, so that we can understand what Paul is saying in Romans 5.

So, Paul said in Romans 5:1-11, that:

1) “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2) Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 3) Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4) and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5) and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. 6) For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7) For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— 8) but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9) Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. 10) For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. 11) More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”

Paul began the letter to the church in Rome by pointing to one of the fundamental truths of Christianity in Romans 1:16-17. The righteous shall live by faith. Those who are in a right relationship with God will live by faith in God. This immediately presents us with a problem that Paul expounds in the rest of chapter 1. All people are by nature unrighteous sinners. They are not in a right relationship with God. They rebelled against God as their King and instead chose to worship other gods. Each person declared themselves king and worshipped created things, lesser things, instead of the Creator. This wrong worship is sin, or any act of rebellion against God and his rule. Sin is anything we think, say, or do that violates God’s law and offends his character. So, all people everywhere are under the curse of sin and stand condemned, guilty before God.

This is particularly shown in chapter 2, where Paul describes God as an impartial judge. No one has a claim to moral superiority because all humans are sinners and condemned. Even the Jews who would in Paul’s

day have claimed to have a moral advantage over the Gentiles, or non-Jews, because they had the Law of God are still guilty and condemned because they too have broken the Law of God. In chapter 3, Paul says that it is an advantage that the Jews have the Law, but they are ultimately just as guilty as everyone else. The point of the first three chapters of Romans becomes clear in the middle of chapter 3. No one is righteous. No one has a right relationship with God. All humans are sinners, and are under sin, and are judged guilty before God, and will experience God's justice and wrath against their lawbreaking. If the letter ended there, then everything we've been talking about over the last few weeks would be meaningless. However, Paul reminds the Romans that even though no one is righteous, there is a righteousness that comes from God that we can have through faith in Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, we are justified before God. That means God has declared us to be righteous by faith in Jesus. We share Jesus' righteousness because in his sacrificial death, he suffered and died for our sin and in our place. The penalty of our sin, the justice of God and his wrath meant for our sin, was poured out on Jesus. His shed blood cleanses us from unrighteousness, and his resurrection from the dead demonstrated that God accepted Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf. He was vindicated in the resurrection and we are justified and set free from the curse of sin and death. Again, all of this is a good gift that God gives which we could not earn or merit ourselves. It is all an act of God's loving grace. It is only experienced by faith, believing in Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Paul points to this kind of faith in Romans 4. He looked back in the Old Testament at Abraham to show that in Genesis 15 Abraham was justified, or declared righteous, before God on the basis of his faith in the promises of God. Abraham trusted in God's good word, his promises, and God counted that to him as righteousness. Paul is also clear that Abraham was righteous before God only by faith because the Law had not even been given yet and, even if it was, Abraham wasn't perfect in himself. Abraham couldn't have earned it by the Law because he didn't know the Law. His was a righteousness from faith, as we've already seen in Romans, the righteous shall live by faith. Immediately before our passage in chapter 5, Paul described how those who share in Abraham's faith in the promises of God, ultimately fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus, are justified by faith in Jesus. This leads to the conclusion that not only are we freed from the curse of the Law which comes to sinners and lawbreakers, but we now receive the blessing of the Law for those who are righteous on the basis that Jesus was righteous and fulfilled the law in our place.

Paul began Romans 5:1 by describing what the gift of justification, everything we've just been talking about, means in the life of a Christian. Notice how the first benefit of our justification is peace with God. Before we trusted in Jesus, we were enemies of God. We lived at war with him, whether we knew it or not. Yet, in Jesus the hostility between sinners and God is removed. Where there was only conflict, now there is peace. Paul is clear that this peace was secured through Jesus. He's also clear in verse 2 that in Jesus we not only have peace with God, but we have access into grace. By grace here, Paul means the unearned and undeserved goodness, kindness, and love that God gives freely of himself to those who could not earn it or ever repay him. The way Paul describes this in verse 2 shows that something has fundamentally changed in our status before God. In our sin, we stood under condemnation and wrath, but in Jesus we stand in grace. That means we stand secure in the undeserved love of God. We have no reason to doubt how God feels about us, if we trust in Jesus and stand firmly in his grace. There's a security through our justification in peace and grace that ultimately leads to our joy overflowing in worship and our hope.

Paul transitions in verse 3 to describe how we can hope not only in the coming glory of God, but even in our present suffering. It seems like a peculiar thing for him to say. Why, if we have peace with God, would we need to worry about suffering? Paul is clear that our hope is forever secured in Christ and that those whom he saves will be saved and enjoy his presence in eternal life; and yet in this life, in the world we will continue to wrestle with dangerous enemies including the world, the devil, and our own sinful inclination. Part of what Paul

is saying by pivoting to suffering is to say that not only do we have hope for the future because our position before God is secured through Jesus, but also that we have hope for today because of our justification by faith in Jesus. Even as we suffer through the trials of this world, we stand in grace, secure in Christ. So, when suffering comes, we can have hope. Notice chain of progression in verses 3-5. We can hope in suffering because suffering teaches us to endure in faith, trusting in Jesus. This enduring and trusting in Jesus produces godly character in us, and character leads us back to hope in Jesus. Paul concludes, then, that suffering isn't frivolous. It is working for us, in God's wisdom and plan, to help us grow in godliness and trust deeper in the gospel, in Jesus. Those, in verse 5, who have this hope will not be put to shame or disappointed. Paul said we can know this is true because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, and that we've been given the Holy Spirit, himself. Notice all the wonderful, passive verbs in this passage. We don't do the action, we receive it. We don't justify ourselves, but we are justified. We don't secure peace for ourselves, but we have peace. We didn't earn access to God and his grace, but we have obtained access. Here, we didn't pour God's love out or earn his Spirit, yet God has given these things to us. Paul's point is that we can have secure hope, even in trials and suffering, because of the extravagance of God's love which God has freely given of himself to us.

This is what Paul is aiming at in verses 6-8. God didn't save us, we who could not have saved ourselves, because we were doing our best. He didn't save us because he needed us. He didn't save us because he could see in us something worth saving. Paul said in verse 6, while we were weak, Christ died for the ungodly. He came for us at our worst. He bled for us while we reviled him. He cleansed us while we spat at and mocked him. He removed the curse of sin and death while we cursed at and killed him. There was nothing lovely in us, and yet God loved us. In verse 7-8, Paul makes clear that humans, even really good ones, are hardly worth dying for. What human would give their life for another? Yet God displayed his love by dying for us while we were sinners. Consider the ultimately absurd disparity of what Paul is saying. He just said even the best human is hardly worth the cost of another human life, and yet God, infinite and matchless in worth, died freely for sinners. He didn't even say God died for the good ones. He said Christ died for sinners. Christ died for us. No act of love is more undeserved, more glorious, more wonderful than the death of the righteous Son of God, for the unrighteous sinner. No wonder Christian musicians through the ages have written song after song, rejoicing in the amazing love of God. "He took my sins and my sorrows, he made them his very own; he bore the burden to Cal'ry and suffered and died alone. How marvelous! How wonderful! And my song shall ever be: How marvelous! How wonderful! Is my Savior's love for me."

Paul concluded this thought in verse 9-11. If God has gone to these amazing lengths to justify and reconcile himself to sinners, we can be confident that he will hold us fast to himself through this life, through the wrath and judgment to come, and into eternal life with him. If the priceless blood of Jesus was spilled to atone for our sins, then we will stand with the righteous in the judgment when God calls all to account for their life. Consider the question of verse 10. If Jesus' death reconciled us to God, now that we are reconciled and secured by his death, how do we measure the benefit of the blessing of his righteous life in which we share? How do we measure how much more we receive by being united with him and sharing in the blessings of God earned through Jesus' righteousness, a righteousness that is ours in union with Christ? Paul concludes verse 11 by circling back to his thought in verse 1. Not only do we share in the blessings of Christ's righteousness, but we can rejoice because we have peace with God, reconciled to him in Jesus. Our joy is found in our reconciliation with God. Our joy is firmly planted in the hope of the glory of God. Our joy is certain even through suffering. Our joy is secure because of the completed work of Jesus Christ.

Allow me to offer a couple of concluding thoughts about how this passage can be applied to us this Resurrection morning.

- 1) Examine your own heart and life. If you are not a Christian and you're looking for some hope in this uncertain time, I want to thank you for participating in this with us this morning. The truth is, according to the Bible, that apart from Christ you don't have any lasting hope. There is none to be found in this world which will endure the test of time, not in the course of normal life, not in suffering, and not in death. Paul is clear, apart from Jesus we are sinners who are under condemnation. We have earned God's wrath. When God sits in judgment, if you are relying on your own good works, they won't be enough. If you are comparing yourself to your neighbor, your scale is off. You might be a better person than the murder in prison, but God isn't comparing you to each other, he's judging you by his righteous, sinless, holy character. We all fall far short of that standard. The only hope we have is found in Jesus alone. Are you trusting in something other than Jesus to be good enough before God? If you pray to God this morning and confess your sins, turn from them, and put your trust in Jesus alone, you can be justified, reconciled, cleansed, and saved this morning. Friend, I plead with you, trust in Jesus for salvation and be set free this morning.
- 2) As we continue to walk through the COVID-19 pandemic, we have a rock-solid foundation of joy and hope. Paul reminds us that though the needs and trials of today are great, Jesus has triumphed over our greatest need. We have peace with God and justification and we stand solidly in grace, all because of God's loving-kindness towards us in Christ. The argument Paul made here, and he continues to make through Romans, is that if God went to these lengths to overcome the insurmountable obstacles that separated us from him, then we can trust him to see us through the light, momentary trials of this life until we see him face to face. This truth is the fount of all joy for the Christian. Spend some time meditating on the goodness of the Lord and offer him praise for how gracious he is. Sing a song. Write a poem. Offer a prayer of thanksgiving. Tell someone about how kind God has been to you. Rejoice.
- 3) Finally, if God has been this kind, this good to us, how can we reflect that kindness and goodness to others? We are to be characterized, as Christians, by our love. It is the kind of love Paul described in this text that Jesus had for us. Love undeserved, but given sacrificially. Grace unearned, but given freely. If you have been justified and reconciled to God, let your life display the loving-kindness of God and reflect his character to those around you.

On this Sunday as we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, let us remember what Jesus has done for us. It is because Jesus lived, died, and rose again that we can have hope for today and the assurance of hope for tomorrow, forever. Let us rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, through our present trials, and on the foundation of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus this Sunday. God bless you.

Sincerely,

Pastor Bryan McClelland
First Southern Baptist Church, Williamsport, PA