

“Freshly Reminded”

Series: *Foundations for Faith*

Romans 3:9-31

September 11, 2011

Introduction

Opening Illustration

A number of years ago Sheri, my 16 month old son Bryce and I were in Kona Hawaii enjoying a time-share vacation. It was the front end of a week-long vacation that we had looked forward to for a long time. That particular morning, I was up first, enjoying the quiet and view from our condo, and anticipating the day ahead.

I made a phone call to inquire concerning tickets to a professional tennis tournament being played nearby. The voice on the other end of the line said, “Match play for today has been canceled.” I thought that this was quite unusual since the sky was blue and sunny. Then, Sheri’s cell phone rang. It was her mom calling. Sheri answered, listened for a minute or two and began to laugh. She thought that what Carley was telling her was a joke. Then, suddenly, the smile drained from her face, replaced by a look of serious concern.

She walked over to turn on the television. There unfolding before us on the news channel was the horror of the World Trade Center Towers billowing smoke and fire after being hit by two hi-jacked airliners. The date was September 11, 2001. We watched in disbelief and stunned silence as the Towers came tumbling down. The news grew more drier with the Pentagon being hit and the downing of Flight 93 near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. I remember experiencing a wide range of emotions; from fear to grief to anger.

Initially, our concern was extremely grave because Sheri’s brother, sister-in-law and their two young children lived across the street from the Twin Towers in Battery Park; the closest residential building to Ground Zero. As it turned out, Wade was out of town. However, Laura, Christina (a year and a half old) and Damon (2 months old) were in their apartment when the planes hit. She and the residents of the building were evacuated before the Towers collapsed, but Laura with two young kids and a stroller in tow helped a man with a heart condition down the flight of stairs. She was heroic.

Unfortunately, Laura’s sister’s husband died in the Twin Towers.

Transition

My guess is that each of us here this morning can share a similar story. We all know exactly where we were and what we were doing when we learned of these terrorist attacks. Indeed, 9-11 is sealed in the American psyche forever, in much the same way as that of the attack on Pearl Harbor and the assassination of JFK.

On September 11, 2001, we all were *freshly reminded* in no uncertain terms that we live in a fallen, broken and dangerous world. We were *freshly reminded* that evil and sin were (and are) an unavoidable reality. And, perhaps we were reminded that apart from divine intervention, this world (and all who live in it) is desperately lost.

Our passage this morning confronts this stark reality, while at the same offering hope and a solution.

Read

We are in the next to last week of our sermon series entitled *Foundations for Faith*. In this series, we have addressed the central, core, non-negotiable tenets/beliefs of the Christian faith: The inspiration of Scripture; the majesty and goodness of God; the nature of Jesus; the ministry and work of the Holy Spirit; and the resurrection. As a result, it is my prayer that we are more grounded in our faith and better able to cope with the *rigors* of an increasingly pluralistic society.

Our passage this morning is Romans 3:9-31. If you are using a pew Bible, you will find the passage on page 1750 of the blue Bible and page 797 of the red Bible. Please stand out of reverence for God's Word and follow along as I read the passage. *Lord, please sanctify us by the truth of your word; your word is truth.*

Explanation

In verse 9, Paul brings to a conclusion his contention that Jews have no decided edge on non-Jews or Gentiles when it comes to escaping the consequences of sin. He had been arguing this point in the verses previous to ours. The bottom line is that both Jews and non-Jews alike are under sin. Paul leaves no room for ambiguity related to this considering the number of times he repeats that all are under the power of and subject to the consequences of sin. And, to be under sin is to be under sin's power and condemnation.

In verses 10-20, Paul lends credibility to his argument by listing a number of Old Testament passages supporting his contention that all are under sin. This tells us that sin is universal in its scope, affecting every aspect of life – both individual and corporate. Paul then reiterates what he has previously said: *“All are guilty of sin. Righteousness cannot be achieved by keeping the Law. Thus, the purpose of the Law is not to save, but to reveal sin and demonstrate to us that we cannot earn God's favor by our own efforts.”*

Finally, we now have the good news! God's solution to the problem of sin is revealed in verses 21-24. If the Law cannot save, then what does? Let's walk through what Paul tells us. Because we all have sinned and have fallen short of the perfection God has intended for us, we therefore are in need of forgiveness. Paul further explains that when we place our faith in Christ, we are forgiven and *justified freely by his grace*. This means that God views us in terms of our relationship with Jesus. Jesus lived a perfect life, died for the forgiveness of our sin and was raised. Thus, through faith in Jesus, God graciously credits to our life account Jesus' perfect life. Because of Jesus, we are declared not guilty of sin. It is as if our sin had never occurred. Paul further tells us that we are *justified...through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus*. The word *redemption* comes from the slave market, meaning the price or ransom paid in order to gain freedom from slavery. Paul uses the word here as a picture of us being freed from slavery to sin because of the price paid by Jesus' death on the cross.

Paul gives even greater detail and explanation in verses 25-26. The phrase *sacrifice of atonement* is a Greek phrase. It communicates the concept that Christ's sacrificial death on the cross is necessary in order to satisfy, appease, or turn away God's wrath as it relates to sin. Without the *sacrifice of atonement*, all people would face punishment for sins committed. But because Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice of atonement, the Old Testament system of animal sacrifice to defer God's wrath and punishment of sin has been satisfied once and for all by Christ's death on the cross.

Paul summarizes his argument in verses 27-31. He tells us *the only way that a person can be justified before God is through faith in Jesus. As a result, there is no room for boasting because we cannot achieve salvation by keeping the Law or by works. Salvation is a gift from*

God and is not earned by any effort on our part. Paul further reminds us that there is only one God. He is God for both Jew and non-Jew alike. *Since God is God for all humankind, it is his right alone and consistent within his nature to determine the means of salvation; which is only through faith in Jesus.* Paul concludes by pointing out that justification by faith alone does not nullify the Law. That is, we can't make the mistake of saying, "I can do whatever I want because I know I will be forgiven." Thus, instead of nullifying the Law, faith actually upholds it. In the passages that follow ours, Paul expands on why this is true. Suffice it to say, "God, in his grace, love and mercy, has provided for us an infinitely greater and healthier way to live. Why would we then want to return to a life of sin when we have been freed from its bondage through faith in Christ?"

Proposition Statement

If we are not justified by good works or keeping the law, how then are we justified?

Point: We are justified before God through faith in Jesus.

Explain

Let's review what this means. In the first 2 ½ chapters of Romans, Paul gives us the bad news regarding the condition of humanity: *"The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."* (Romans 1:18-20) Paul summarizes in verse 23 of our passage: *"For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."* Notice that Paul says *All have sinned and fallen short*; both Jews and non-Jews.

Yes, the Jews are God's chosen people. Yes, they have a unique place within God's plan of redemption. Yes, God has given them his Law. However, no one has been able to keep the Law. Thus, Paul's conclusion is that the purpose of the Law is not to save, but to reveal sin in our lives and our need for forgiveness. Paul also tells us that non-Jews do not get a free pass either. Why? It is because the created world points to a creator, God has stamped his Law upon our hearts (we innately know right from wrong), and God has given us a conscience that guides and directs us. Thus, the bottom line is that we cannot earn God's favor by attempting to live a good life. We can only earn God's favor by placing our faith in Jesus.

Cross Reference

Ephesians 2:8-10 further underscores this truth, *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."*

Personal Illustration

A number of years ago, I was leading a discussion in a Bible study concerning sin, the nature of salvation and what Christ has done on our behalf. At one point, a participant (who happened to be a well-respected person within the church) raised his hand and said, "Tony, don't you think that if someone lives a really good life God will accept that person, whether or not he has ever received Jesus as his Savior?"

Quite frankly, I was a little surprised by the question considering who asked it. But, I answered by saying, “With all due respect, Scripture is very clear concerning this. All have sinned. The wages of sin is death. But, the gift of God is eternal life through faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:23 and 6:23) If we believe we can earn God’s favor through our own efforts, then what was the point of Jesus dying on the cross in the first place?”

What I didn’t say (but wished I had) is, “Can we assume that good works somehow cancel out the need for forgiveness of the sins we have committed? If I were to rob a bank, I would still face jail time despite the fact that I might be a good father and husband.” Scripture is abundantly clear in telling us that we are entitled to absolutely nothing in this life.

Quote

John Flavel, a 17th century Presbyterian minister from England, articulates this truth better than I: *“How dangerous it is to join anything of our own to the righteousness of Christ, in pursuit of justification before God! Jesus Christ will never endure this; it reflects upon His work dishonorably. He will be all, or none, in our justification. If He has finished the work, what need is there of our additions? And if not, to what purpose are they? Can we finish that which Christ Himself could not complete? Did He finish the work, and will He ever divide the glory and praise of it with us? No, no; Christ is no half-Savior. It is a hard thing to bring proud hearts to rest upon Christ for righteousness. God humbles the proud by calling sinners wholly from their own righteousness to Christ for their justification.”*

Application

So, how do we bring our thinking into line with what Paul is telling us here?

- *First, we need to quit playing the comparison game.* That is, we must not justify our own position and bolster our own ego by saying, “I’m doing pretty well in my life compared to most people, especially Lenny over there.” When we compare ourselves to others, we are using the wrong standard of measure. This, of course, was the mistake of the Jewish religious leaders who opposed Jesus. They believed they *were all that and more*. Their failure was in not applying God’s law internally. Do you remember what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount? *You have heard that it was said, “Do not commit adultery.” But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* Thus, our standard of measurement should be Jesus. When we compare our lives to his, we immediately discover that we fall infinitely short.
- *Second, we need to set aside our pride.* We must be willing to admit that we truly do fall infinitely short of the standard set by Jesus and, as a result, we are in need of his forgiveness, grace and mercy. This one is difficult because it is a part of human nature to not want to admit fault.
- *Finally, we need to humbly receive God’s gracious gift of forgiveness and eternal life by believing in Jesus.* Now, I realize that most, if not all present this morning, know Jesus as Lord and Savior. Even so, I know that I must continually guard myself against the comparison game and pride. I believe this is true for all of us as well. If we allow either comparison or pride to creep into our thinking, we can quickly become legalistic and self-righteous. Proverbs 8:13 is clear concerning God’s attitude toward pride: *“To fear the Lord is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech.”*

Conclusion

Friends, when we completely surrender our lives to Christ (laying aside our pride), we find ourselves unburdened and freed to become the people that God desires us to be. We don't need to earn his favor because he has given to us Christ's perfect life. Because of Jesus, it is as if our sins have never occurred. As a result, and out of gratitude for what he has done for us, we demonstrate our love for him by living Christ-like lives. Please pray with me.