

“JUSTIFIED FOR WHAT?”

Genesis 12: 1-6; Romans 5: 1-11

I am delighted to report that I have received my certificate to become a paralegal! I am actually certifiable according to some folks. But I finished the six-month course of work with a 95 average in all six modules. Which simply means I learned how to GOOGLE the answers on the test. However, I feel I know enough to be dangerous. It is my hope to work for an attorney for free to gain some experience in the field. And as to my certificate, I have to print it myself! So, I have some card stock paper at home,

but it is orange in color. Staff this past week said, “NO!”

I mention this fact to keep you updated but also to set the context for today’s sermon. Our series of “Talk the Talk” began with Creation. We moved last week to the Providence of God and Evil. And today, we move to justification. It is a much more personal doctrine to consider which calls for each of us to be willing to do some self-examination.

A common phrase used in Christian circles is that we are “justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ!” It is central to our understanding of being a

Christian, of our relationship with God and of our notion of salvation. While it is a very simple concept, it is extremely hard for us to practice and accept.

The idea of justification is a legal concept and so let's look at that briefly. It is not unusual for us to justify ourselves in all kinds of ways:

-I justify eating a big piece of cake because I am drinking a diet coke.

-I justify purchasing a very expensive car because of all of the safety features.

-I justify my teenage children taking dancing lessons because I did not have them or because I had to take them.

-I justify taking a very expensive vacation because I need a break from all the stress in my life recently!

-I justify telling someone some information about a third party because that person always ignores me.

-I justify not participating in church because of the way I was treated by the pastor.

Justification. It is our defense. It gives the reason why we are innocent of an alleged offense. In the court room, you are accused of a crime. You give you defense to why you did what you did. The judge declares you are right and therefore innocent.

Technically, justification is a defense in a case whereby the defendant who committed the crime claims they did no wrong because their action advanced a social issue or vindicated an important right. You took the high road and did what you did because it had a higher benefit for society or other people.

Some examples of justification defense include:

- self defense
- protecting others from harm
- defending personal property

All of which are legitimate in the eyes of the defendant. It may have

broken the law technically, yet the act created a higher value.

Translate that to our faith. What is your defense about your relationship with Jesus Christ and with God? How do you plead?

- Well, I attend church regularly.
- I teach a Bible study.
- I pray an hour each day.
- I give 15% to the church
- I sing in the choir.

All of which are evidence of our defense about why I am a Christian and why I am saved. See what I have done.

See how deserving I am. See how appropriate I am!

To which God says, “that’s all good.” But, you miss the point. It is really not about you. It really is not that you are the “Christian of the Year.” It is not even that you are an ordained clergy person. NOPE!

The focus is not on what you have done. The gift is what I (God) has done. How God has loved you. How God reached out to your first.

And the only appropriate response is “thank you!” Just accept the gift. Believe. Have faith.

Which sounds so simple. Almost elementary. Childlike. And yet we struggle about it.

In the Protestant tradition, we have what we call four “watchwords.” They form the structure on which we hang this tapestry we call Justification:

- Christ alone
- Grace alone
- Faith alone
- Scripture alone.

These form the corners in which we understand justification by grace through faith.

CHRIST ALONE: we think we need to do something to earn our salvation. When in fact nothing is further from the truth. Christ has already done what is needed. Romans 5:8, “While we still were sinners, Christ died for us.” I have often wondered why did Christ have to die. Was there not some other way God could have saved the world?

Think back to last week when we talked about vocation, permission, and prohibition. The first human beings could do anything they wanted to do in the Garden EXCEPT eat o the tree in the center of the Garden. For if they did, they would have the knowledge of good and

evil. And the consequence of eating of that tree is they would die! Otherwise, they would have never died!

To pay the price for that action, Christ had to die. Christ had to face the last enemy. The one block between humanity and God. The one last obstacle. So he took on himself the sins of the world begun because of the disobedience in the Garden. He did for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Christ alone had to do that. And Christ did. In doing so, we are now justified before God because of Christ’s action. Not because of anything we did. Christ alone did the deed.

GRACE ALONE: it truly is a gift and grace occurs because God reaches out to us with the gift of salvation.

Lots of us declare we need to find God. We need to get our act together. We need to cuddle up with God. Thinking that we can do that. Which cannot happen. We do not go looking for God. God comes looking for us. God seeks us out. God desires us. God pricks our conscience and draws us close to him.

The Prodigal Son's Father is the classic example. The son decided all that he could do was to get back in his Father's good graces. And so he headed home only wanting to be a slave for his

Father. But what happened? While the Prodigal, that Scoundrel, was far off in the distance, the Father sees him coming and races out to greet and embrace him. Welcoming him like a hero and accepting him just as he is - - scoundrel and all!

Do you believe that? That God accepts you with all your hang-ups, with all our anger, with all our prejudices, with all the grudges you hold?

God does. But, don't you think you need to clean up some of your act before God really accepts you? God accepts us. Just like we are. Sinful, horrible, terrible acting persons. Period. End of discussion. And we cannot fathom it. We

somehow must be worthy. We must somehow earn it. At least do something for God's sake! At least say something.

The most beautiful illustration of this reality is in infant baptism. Before a child is aware or even cognitively thinking, the child is baptized and we declare a child of God. Chosen by God. Loved by God. Called by God.

Without a charge. Without a requirement. Without any ability required. Just accepted. Grace alone. God's way of dealing with God's creation.

Third is **FAITH ALONE**: Here comes our response. Our ability to live out this grace given through Christ.

Yet, a similar struggle can exist here also. We can imagine having such strong faith that our faith makes us worthy. It is our strong faith that makes us faithful, we surmise.

It can only become another form of work's righteousness. Another way to prove we are ok. Another way to say we have made it and earned our salvation.

Our Old Testament Lesson this morning illustrates this truth. God said to Abram, "Go from your country and kindred to the land I will show you." He

was 75 years old. A similar age to many sitting here or in range of my voice.

So, God declares to you, GO!

Uproot yourselves. Leave your family.

Leave your children and grandchildren.

And go to a place that I will show you!

How many of you would sign up? It's

hard enough to leave your home for a

retirement community right here in

Richmond. Much less to some unknown

place!

While in seminary, Balmer Kelly, a

great biblical scholar as well as a

wonderful teacher of the New Testament,

illustrated this concept. In class, he went

up to a student on the front row and gave

him a \$5.00 bill! That was good money fifty years ago! He said to the student and to the class, this is like God's grace and faith. It's yours. You did not earn it. You don't deserve it. You are given this free gift.

Amazing except the rest of us

wondered why we did not get the \$5.00!

At the end of class, the student went back

up to Dr. Kelly returning the \$5.00 to

him. NO, Dr. Kelly declared! That's the

whole point. It is yours to use in good

faith. It is a free gift!

Isn't that student like a lot of us?

We don't think we are worthy. We do not

deserve this grace. We do not have faith.

We really are not sure if Christ will be with us in a faith-filled life.

The shock to me as a young pastor was how worship attendance was lower on Communion Sundays. I watched it for a while and finally asked some people why that was the case. I got a quick and definite answer: “We are not good enough. We do not deserve the sacrament. We are not worthy.”

Which is exactly the opposite reason for the sacrament. For we need the sacrament to fortify and nurture our faith. the sacrament is a literal reminder of the faith that is ours. Living life like Abraham by the mercy and grace of God.

Assured that God will walk with us in this journey we call faith. Faith enabling us to live our lives because it is by God’s grace and through faith in his mercies that enables us to live one day at a time.

Justified for what?

Our own defense is God, not us. God did it. God took the punishment. God showered grace on us just like we are. God gives us faith to live each day as it comes.

Our four corners are

Christ alone: possible because of the sacrifice of Christ.

Grace alone: freely given to us as a gift. Nothing we can do to obtain it.

Faith alone: how we live every day
of our lives - - by faith.

Scripture alone: the witness that
declares all of this to be utterly true.

We are justified for one purpose: to
love God and love one another. God did
it for us. How we can do anything less
for God?