

What's In It For Me?
Scripture Lessons: Romans 5

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Many years ago I was driving on the freeway in New Jersey listening to the news on the radio. What caught my attention was the story of a conceited murderer who had served several years in prison despite the fact that he had steadfastly maintained his innocence. Despite his claims to be innocent, a jury, examining the available evidence, found him guilty of the crime. He was sentenced to life in prison. Several years later new evidence suggested that he really had been innocent. The case was tried again and the jury found the man innocent in the light of the new evidence. The man was acquitted. The Biblical word for what happened to him was *justification*. He was justified. He was pronounced legally no longer liable for the murder. But what made the news story so interesting to me was that after the man was declared innocent and set free he confessed that he had in fact committed the murder.

Something like that happens when God justifies condemned sinner through faith in Christ. “When God justifies condemned sinners through faith in Christ. “When God justifies sinners, he is not declaring bad people to be good, or saying that they are not sinners after all; he is pronouncing them legally righteous, free from any liability to the broken law, because he himself in his Son has borne the penalty of their law-breaking (Stott).” We remain sinners but God acquits us through faith in Christ. The envious person still struggles with envy. The gossip still struggles with spreading gossip. The alcoholic is not miraculously freed from the desire to drink. The greedy person still has a desire to gain more and more. We are still sinners but God declares us legally righteous when we trust in Christ. Martin Luther used a Latin term to describe the condition of a Christian: Simul justis et peccator. A Christian is “at the same time righteous and sinful”. Unless we understand this we will either become self-righteous, thinking that we’re no longer sinners, or we will become discouraged and wonder if we’re really trusting in Christ since sin is so deeply rooted in our hearts.

But, Paul tells us that when we are justified by faith we receive certain benefits that enable us to deal with our sin and discouragement as we struggle to live as Christ would have us live. There are at least three important benefits of being justified by faith in Christ.

1. First, Paul tells us that we have “Peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Let me try to explain what Paul meant. Back in the sixties I read of a few Japanese soldiers who continued to fight in the jungles of the Philippines years after World War 2 was over. In their jungle isolation they hadn’t heard that the war was over. They hadn’t heard that Japan and the United States had been reconciled. Years before they had taken an oath to the emperor to keep on fighting to the death or until the war was over. So they continued to hid and fight until, at last, they were sought out and found in the jungle and given a written declaration from the emperor, Hirohito, that the war was over and that they were longer bound to the oath they had taken to defend him. Peace had been objectively achieved but they were unable to enjoy that peace until they believed.

Sometimes we’re like those Japanese soldiers. We may continue to feel that God is angry with us. We may continue to feel that God is fighting against us. WE may continue to try to hide from God like those soldiers hiding from the enemy. The Gospel comes to us declaring that when we were still enemies God reconciled us to himself through the death of Christ. Through the death of Christ peace has been objectively achieved. Only when we believe the good news are we able to enjoy peace with God.

So the first benefit of justification is peace with God.

2. A second benefit that we receive when we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ is access to grace. “Through (Christ) we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand”. The word “access” is a rather formal word. It refers to a representative of a king or queen who escorts a commoner into the presence of the sovereign. Through Jesus Christ we have access to God and all his vast means of grace.

When I was a boy I had a good friend by the name of Eddie Grandel who belonged to the YMCA in Wilmington. I didn’t belong so I didn’t have access to the various programs offered by the Y. Eddie would, however, sometimes take me to the Y as a guest. Through him I had access to the game rooms and some of the other programs. Finally, as a result of my relationship to him, I joined the Y myself and gained access to all the programs and opportunities offered. I learned

how to swim at the YMCA. I learned how to play pool. I took boxing lessons, ran on the indoor track, became active in the YMCA youth program where we watched movies. I gained access through Eddie Grandel.

Paul tells us that through Christ we have access to the grace of God. And, in a way, having access to that grace is like belonging to the YMCA. The YMCA has programs and activities whose aim it is to build us up physically, emotionally, and spiritually. What are these means of grace. The three main means of grace are the preaching of the Word of God, the sacraments, and prayer. Through the wise and diligent use of these means of grace we may have hope of building ourselves up spiritually.

Access to this grace helps us in our struggles, temptations, trials and crises we have in life.

When we sin we have access to the forgiving grace of God. When we become discouraged with our lack of progress we're assured by God's promises that the One who reconciled us when we were God's enemies will surely save us by his life. Because we have access to this grace we come again and again to be fed and strengthened by the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Within the church we find a fellowship of sinners, each of us struggling with our own besetting sins but also finding encouragement and strength through our mutual prayers and support. Using these means of grace we have hope of getting better. That's why we say that the church is a hospital for sinners. In the church sinners of all kinds should be free to confess their sin, receive forgiveness and make use of the means of grace which are meant to strengthen and heal us and our world on our journey.

So a second benefit of justification is the access we have to grace through Christ.

3. A third benefit of justification is hope. Paul tells us that we can actually boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. I am still a sinner and yet I can boast that one day I will share in God's glory. I might have to endure suffer from inner torment and conflict as well as suffering afflicting by others upon myself, nevertheless I can actually boast, glory, exult in the hope of sharing God's glory. I can boast in the hope that one day this crooked world with its poverty, its

wars, its hatred and divisions will actually be put right through Christ and that I, sinful as I am now, will be put right and made whole.

There are some days I have more hope than other. There are many days that I don't boast much at all of this hope. There are days in which my hope seems pitifully ridiculous especially when I look at the world and at myself and my paltry efforts at self improvement. And yet, when I put aside my feelings and listen to the promise of God I confess, in faith, and I boast that one day we, you and I, who trust in Christ and have been justified, will share the glory of God.

Many Christians live lives of quiet desperation without hope of ever conquering the temptations that have overcome them. They wonder what's in the Christian life for them. "I've tried and tried and am now at the point of giving up. I still trust in Christ but what's the use of struggling in a world of so many temptations." We wonder if God is angry with us. We feel cut off from God. We feel hopeless. The Gospel is the good news that those who have been justified by faith have peace with God. God is no longer with us. We have access to grace through Jesus Christ. God is not inaccessible. We have hope. We need not despair when we become discouraged.

What's in this Christian life for you and me? Peace with God, access to God's grace, and hope of becoming what God intends us to be. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us pray: Cleansed of our sin and justified by faith in Christ, we received the promise of your grace. Given hope of sharing your glory, we come before you with thanksgiving. Hear our prayers for those who suffer; may they persevere with greater patience and strength. May our arms enfold them as we support them in their trials. May our presence be of comfort as we bear with them their burdens. We have heard that endurance develops character. May we through our mutual forbearance as sisters and brothers learn what it means to trust in your love. Having sent us your Son, who himself agonized with death, you have shown us to what extent you will go to relieve estrangement and distress. With our lives attuned to your purpose and will, maybe we be of some hope to those needing your word. This we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.