

From 1965-1969, Hubert Humphrey was the Vice President of the United States, serving under President Lynden B. Johnson. When he died, in 1978, dignitaries from all over the world attended his funeral. Each person who came was welcome, except one—former President Richard Nixon. Just a few years before, President Nixon had brought shame to his country, to the Presidency, and to himself through the Watergate Scandal. Everyone noticed Nixon’s presence at the funeral, but he was treated as though he were an infectious disease—eyes turned away, and people avoided him.

Then Jimmy Carter, the serving United States President, walked into the room. Carter was from a different political party than Nixon and was well known for his honesty and integrity. As he moved to his seat, President Carter noticed Nixon standing all alone. Carter immediately changed course, walked over to Nixon, held out his hand, and smiling genuinely, embraced Nixon saying, “Welcome home, Mr President! Welcome home!”

The incident was later reported by Newsweek magazine, which wrote: “If there was a turning point in Nixon’s long ordeal in the wilderness, it was that moment and that gesture of love and compassion.”¹

There is no feeling in the world like the feeling of forgiveness—to be restored, welcomed, and embraced. No one likes needing forgiveness but every human heart longs to be forgiven and welcomed home.

This morning we continue in preaching series entitled, *The Wonder of the Cross*—each week we will be looking at a New Testament word that sheds light on what Jesus accomplished when He died on the cross. Last week we focussed on the word “reconciliation.” When we look to the Cross we see two intersecting beams—the vertical and the horizontal; I encouraged everyone to think of these beams in terms of our relationship with God and one another. It’s here at the Cross that broken relationships can be mended. God has acted in Christ to reconcile humanity to Himself, and, to reconcile us to one another.

The word we’re going to look at this morning is “justification,” and biblically speaking, reconciliation and justification are related words—without justification, reconciliation wouldn’t be possible. Both words refer to God’s action, in Christ, through the cross, to bring about a worldwide, forgiven, family. If reconciliation addresses the separation between humanity and God, then justification is the bridge.

If you’ve spent a fair amount of time in church, then perhaps you’ve heard this word before. At times the Bible describes sin as the breaking of God’s law, which results in a legal guilt. There are things we should have done but haven’t; there are things we should not have done but have. As a result, we find ourselves accused, but we are without defence—we are guilty as charged before the Judge of Heaven and Earth. But the good news is that at the cross, God, in Christ, has taken the guilt for our wrong doing upon Himself—the

¹ Maxie Dunnam, *The Workbook on Living as a Christian*, 112-113.

penalty for our wrong doing has fallen upon Jesus and we have been pardoned.

All of this may sound familiar to you—this may be what comes to mind when you think about why Jesus died and what His death accomplished. I've been praying that this word, justification, and the experiential reality that lies behind it, would aid us in our worship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Nowhere is God's goodness and love seen more clearly than through the cross of Jesus Christ.

Before I further explain what justification *is*, I want to take some time to explain what it *is not*.

(a) First, justification is not a divinely inspired mathematical equation, though perhaps you've heard it described this way. You made have heard your life before God described as being like a spiritual bank account, with both debits and deposits—every time we sin there is a debit, while every good thing we do functions a deposit. In order to get to heaven we need to have a certain balance, but the problem is that we all have a lot more debits than deposits. Enter Jesus Christ—His righteous life, His death on the cross, means that He has unlimited credit, and, if you put your faith in Him, He will deposit His credit to your account.

God is not a Divine Mathematician or a Banker, and He's certainly

interested in much more than debits and deposits—sin and salvation are much more personal and relational than this.

(b) Second, justification does not blind God to human sinfulness. I've heard justification described in the following way: Jesus died on the cross for us, and when we put our faith in Him "*it's just as if we'd never sinned*". But in order for this to happen, God would need to pretend that we are something that we are clearly not.

I've heard another version of this that is quite similar: *if we put out faith in Jesus, when God looks at us, He doesn't see us, or our sin, He sees Jesus and His righteousness*. This scenario envisions God as being spiritually near-sighted: we're standing before Him, we've got a super-sized cut-out of Jesus face in front of our face, God is squinting and when He sees this cut-out He says to Himself "*Well, that looks a lot like my Son, Jesus—come on in!*"

Justification does not work like this either. Humanity stands accused before God—we are guilty and without defence. God does not acquit us, on the basis of Jesus' death, saying "*You haven't done anything wrong.*"² No, in justification something very different takes place.

(c) Third, when the Apostle Paul talked about justification, he was not fighting against a Jewish theology of works. No faithful Jew ever believed that they could ever do enough to work their way to God—they believed in, and depended upon, grace just as we find in the

² John 8:1-11 (Jesus' interaction with a woman caught in adultery).

New Testament. In talking about justification by grace, through faith, Paul was making an entirely different point.³

What I'd like to do now is walk through two texts in the Book of Romans that are connected to the justifying work of Christ on the cross. To begin, please open your Bible with me to Romans 1:16-17.

Read.

1. Romans 1:16-17 *“I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”*

It's important to understand that the Greek words 'justify' and 'justification' belong to the same root as the words 'righteous' and 'righteousness'. To “justify” means “to make righteous,” or, “to declare righteous”.

When the Bible describes God as righteous, it is saying one—or more—of three things: (a) God is “right,” which is to say, He is morally pure/perfect; (b) God will do right by Israel/the world—He will be faithful to all of His covenant promises; and (c) God will restore the world/cosmos to its original condition.⁴ Because God is righteous, we can trust Him to make things right again.

When Paul talks about the gospel, he is referring to the good news concerning the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In this Jesus we see God's righteousness: (a) in Jesus, we see God's perfection and moral purity; (b) in Jesus, we see God's faithfulness to His promises—to rescue Israel and the world; (c) in Jesus, we see God's plan to renew and restore everything.

Justification depends on a righteous God, working with and for humanity, in order to make them “right” again—and this is what we see when we look to the cross.

2. The second text can be found in Romans 3:10-11, 19-26.

“There is no one righteous, not even one...there is no one who seeks God... 19 Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. 20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. 21 But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22 This righteousness is given through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

³ That point being that although Israel had the Law, it was keeping the Law that mattered. And, that Israel and Gentiles were alike in their sin before God—the Law didn't deal with their sin, it exposed it!

⁴ Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, 97.

25 God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— 26 he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

In vs. 10-11, we hear God’s verdict—*there is no one righteous, not even one, no one who seeks God.* In verse 19 Paul introduces the image of a courtroom—all of humanity stands before God—accused, guilty, and without defence. In vs. 22-23, Paul says that in spite of Israel’s privileged relationship with God, in spite of the fact that have received God’s Law, Jew and Gentile alike find themselves in the same, rapidly sinking, boat—all have sinned, all have missed the mark, all have failed to live for God’s glory.

This charge—of universal human sinfulness—is controversial today, but then, it’s always been controversial. The only standard we want to accept is a standard of our own making. We are being urged to *be true to ourselves*, as if self-rule is what matters, so that each person sets a personal standard for themselves as to what is right or wrong. The problem is, of course that the tyrant, the swindler, the adulterer, and the murderer are all being “*true to themselves*”.⁵ Try as we might, we cannot eliminate God’s standard—because He is righteous, right and wrong remains.

But, says Paul, though we are guilty, a righteousness from God has

been revealed—not a righteousness that condemns, but a righteousness that is acting on our behalf, a righteousness that can make us right and save us. Verse 22, “*This righteousness is given through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ to all who believe.*” Look at verse 26—God, in Christ, through the cross, is seen to be both the Just Judge and the One who justifies—the one who declares us to be “in the right,” forgiven, and without guilt before God.

And, Paul tells us, this justifying work of Jesus—vs. 24—is freely given as a gift of His grace. Whenever we see the word “grace” in the New Testament it is always shorthand for the love of God, demonstrated through Christ and the Spirit, to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. Justification describes the work of God, dealing with our sin, through the death of Jesus on the cross.

But here’s the all-important question: *how does the death of Jesus, the Innocent One, make anyone righteous?* In our current legal system, if you do the crime, you must do the time; another person cannot stand in for you. *How does the death of Jesus take care of our guilt?*

One author writes, “I suggest that we see the achievement of the cross in three expressions: Jesus dies ‘**with us**’—entering into our evil and our sin and our suffering to subvert it and create a new way; Jesus dies ‘**instead of us**’—he enters into *our* sin, *our* wrath, and *our* death; and Jesus dies ‘**for us**’—his death forgives our sin, ‘declares

⁵ N.T. Wright, *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary: Volume IX: Romans*, 378

us right,' absorbs the wrath of God against us, and creates new life where there was once only death."⁶

In becoming human, God the Son bound Himself to our sinful condition, and in so doing Jesus can and does act as humanity's representative—the life He lived and the death He died was for all people. As I said last week, through Jesus we experience a magnificent exchange—Jesus became what we are, that we might receive what is His. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*"

Something I said last week bears repeating—at the cross the magnificent exchange is revealed. At the cross, Jesus took our sin, our guilt, our law breaking, while we are made right and declared forgiven. Justification is the grounds of reconciliation—our guilt has been removed and we have been forgiven, welcomed, and embraced by God. Romans 5:1-2 says, "*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. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.*"

Conclusion/Story: I want to conclude this morning with story that was written many years ago. Some of you will know this story, for others of you it will be new—this story is a modern day parable about the justifying work of Christ; He takes what is ours, our broken, sinful, humanity, so that we might be forgiven and made new. May this parable speak life to your heart today.

The Ragman: I stumbled upon a story most strange, like nothing in my life, my street sense, my sly tongue had ever prepared me for... Hush now, and I will tell it to you.

Before the dawn one Friday morning I noticed a young man, handsome and strong, walking the alleys of our City. He was pulling an old cart filled with clothes both bright and new, and he was calling in a clear tenor voice: '*Rags!*' Ah, the air was foul and the first light filthy to be crossed by such sweet music. '*Rags! New rags for old! I take your tired rags! Rags!*'

'*Now this is a wonder,*' I thought to myself, for the man stood six-foot-four, and his arms were like tree limbs, hard and muscular, and his eyes flashed intelligence. Could he find no better job than this, to be a ragman in the inner city?

I followed him. My curiosity drove me. And I wasn't disappointed.

Soon the ragman saw a woman sitting on her back porch. She was sobbing into a handkerchief, sighing, and shedding a thousand tears. Her knees and elbows made a sad X. She had no hope. Her heart was breaking and she was wracked with sobs. Her body may have been alive, but her soul wanted to die.

The Ragman stopped his cart. Quietly he walked over to the woman, stepping round empty beer cans and old newspapers, dead toys and broken furniture. '*Give me your rag,*' he said gently, '*and I'll give you another.*'

⁶ McKnight, 69.

He slipped the handkerchief from her eyes. She looked up, and he laid across her palm a linen cloth so clean and new that it shined. She blinked from the gift to the giver.

Then, as he began to pull his cart again, the Ragman did a strange thing: he put her stained handkerchief to his own face; and then he began to weep, to sob as grievously as she had done, his shoulders shaking. Yet she was left without a tear.

'*This is a wonder;*' I breathed to myself, and I followed the sobbing Ragman like a child who cannot turn away from mystery.

'*Rags! Rags! New Rags for old!*'

In a little while, when the sky showed grey behind the rooftops and I could see the shredded curtains hanging out of black windows, the Ragman came upon a girl whose head was wrapped in a bandage, with eyes as vacant as the windows around her. Blood soaked her bandage and a single line of blood ran down her cheek.

Now the tall Ragman looked upon this child with pity, and he drew a lovely yellow hat from his cart. '*Give me your rag,*' he said, '*and I'll give you mine.*'

The child could only gaze at him while he loosened the bandage, removed it, and tied it to his own head. The hat he set on hers. And I gasped at what I saw: for with the bandage went the wound! Against his brow it ran a darker, more substantial blood—his own!

'*Rags! Rags! I take old rags!*' cried the sobbing, bleeding, strong, intelligent Ragman.

The sun hurt both the sky, now, and my eyes; the Ragman seemed more and more to hurry.

'*Are you going to work?*' he asked a man who leaned against a telephone pole. The man shook his head. The Ragman pressed him: '*Do you have a job?*'

'*Are you crazy?*' sneered the other. He pulled away from the pole, revealing the right sleeve of his jacket—flat, the cuff stuffed into the pocket. He had no arm.

'*So,*' said the Ragman. '*Give me your jacket, and I'll give you mine.*'

So much quiet authority in his voice!

The one-armed man took off his jacket. So did the Ragman—and I trembled at what I saw: for the Ragman's arm stayed in its sleeve, and when the other put it on, he had two good arms, thick as tree limbs; but the Ragman had only one.

'*Go to work,*' he said.

After that he found a drunk, lying unconscious beneath an army blanket, an old man, hunched, wizened, and sick. He took that blanket and wrapped it round himself, but for the drunk he left new clothes.

And now I had to run to keep up with the Ragman. Though he was weeping uncontrollably, and bleeding freely at the forehead, pulling his cart with one arm, stumbling for drunkenness, falling again and again, exhausted, old, and sick, yet he went with terrible speed. On

spider's legs he skittered through the alleys of the City, this mile and the next, until he came to its limits, and then he rushed beyond.

I wept to see the change in this man. I hurt to see his sorrow. And yet I need to see where he was going in such haste, perhaps to know what drove him so.

The little, old, Ragman came to an abandoned lot that was filled with piles of trash, old furniture, and the rusted out shells of cars. He moved among the garbage pits and piles of human refuse and finally climbed to the top of a tiny hill and cleared a small space. With a deep sigh, he laid his head on a handkerchief and a jacket. He covered his bones with a tattered army blanket. And he died.

Oh how I cried to witness that death! I sat down in an old, abandoned car and wailed and mourned as one who has no hope—because I had come to love the Ragman. Every other face had faded in the wonder of this man, and I cherished him; but he died. I sobbed myself to sleep.

I did not know—how could I know—that I slept through Friday night and Saturday and on through Saturday night as well. But then, on Sunday morning, I was wakened by a violence.

Light—pure, hard, demanding light—slammed against my sour face, and I blinked, and I looked, and I saw the first wonder of all. There was the Ragman, folding the blanket most carefully, a scar on his forehead, but alive! And, besides that, healthy! There was no sign of sorrow or age, and all the rags that he had gathered shined for cleanliness.

Well, then I lowered my head and, trembling for all that I had seen, I walked up to the Ragman. I told him my name with shame, for I was a sorry figure next to him. And I said to him with dear yearning in my voice: 'Please take my tired rags and replace them with new ones.'

He dressed me. My Lord, he put new rags on me, and I am now a wonder beside him. The Ragman, the Ragman, the Christ!"

Prayer

Worship

Benediction: May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you and the ones you love, today and forever.