

“The Letters of Apostle Paul: The Message of Romans”

Romans 1:17, 3:21-25

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The one who is righteous will live by faith! What does it mean to be righteous? How does righteousness relate to our life? Apostle Paul assures us that we will receive *strength* and *live* by faith in the grace of God through Jesus Christ. Grace and faith give us the source of power and strength to deal with life challenges.

Last month, July, was challenging! A number of people in our church were sick or recuperating from surgeries. I visited and called a number of people. Two loved members passed away and I had to deal with life and death challenges through memorial services. On top of these, the news that a large tumor was found in my mother's brain broke my heart. In a sense, life is a mysterious trip. There are times we enjoy life's moments but we also struggle with sickness, loss and grief and inevitable life challenges. Life may be compared to a roller coaster. It rides up and down surprising us with unexpected challenges. When I see my two little sons' silly and happy smiles, they make me feel so grateful for life. Life is so good! But when I hear that my loved ones are sick or they are struggling with chronic illness and other life challenges, I feel that life is hard. One of the lessons that I learned from my parish ministry, especially when loved ones die, we humbly come to a sense that we are not in control of life. We humbly turn to God and pray, Lord, Have Your Mercy on us. Faith helps us to let go of our wishes and instead to learn how to live in hope. Faith gives us a promise that God will grant us eternal life in Jesus Christ. This morning, I am going to explore the Apostle Paul's confident confession about joy of salvation by faith in his letters to the Romans.

Without doubt, the Apostle Paul made a great contribution to the Christian Church. Of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament, fourteen books have traditionally been attributed to the great work of Paul. Modern New Testament scholars agree that seven of the New Testament letters were certainly written by Paul. Romans is one of them. He was not only a scholar and theologian but he was also a missionary and preacher who established Christian faith and beliefs. Romans is the collection of his brilliant theological insights on Christian faith. Biblical scholars believe that during the winter of 57-58 A.D., Paul wrote Romans while he was staying in the Greek city of Corinth and this

letter predates the earliest of the Gospels, Mark by at least ten years.¹ The Apostle Paul's main message in the Roman letters was life's salvation and work of faith. He wished to give his followers assurance that their lives would be strengthened by understanding God's grace by faith. How does faith work to guarantee our salvation?

In our Scripture reading, Paul says, "It's news I'm most proud to proclaim, this extraordinary Message of God's powerful plan to rescue everyone who trusts him, starting with Jews and then right on to everyone else! God's way of putting people right shows up in the acts of faith, confirming what Scripture has said all along: "The person in right standing before God by trusting him really lives." We call this "Justification by faith". But how do we know that we are blessed to be the righteous and to receive a gift of faith for the blessings of life? Paul meant not only our physical blessing of life, but he also meant the promise of eternal life by faith in Jesus Christ.

This seems to be very simple, but there have been centuries of debate among theologians, especially between the Catholic Church and Protestant Churches for sixteen centuries. Martin Luther, a Catholic priest and professor interpreted Paul's understanding of righteousness that God in His grace was making available to those who receive it passively, not those who would achieve it actively. They would receive it by faith. Luther regarded the word, righteous, to *count* as righteous, to *declare* as righteous. Luther said, "Paul is not talking about the righteousness by which God Himself is righteous, but a righteousness that God gives freely by His grace to people who don't have righteousness of their own. It's a righteousness that outside of us, namely, the righteousness of Christ."² And this was the moment of awakening for Luther. Martin Luther as a Catholic monk, he had tried every Catholic ritual and discipline to sanctify his righteousness, kneeling in prayer, fasting and even climbing a Roman staircase on his knees, but he realized that he couldn't claim righteousness. He hated the word, righteousness. But Catholic church fathers understood the doctrine of justification is what happens when God, through the sacraments of the church and elsewhere, makes unrighteous people righteous. Traditional Roman Catholic teaching regards justification as a process in which a sinner is made righteous. Justification follows sanctification. The Roman Catholic is taught to come to faith by good works; the Protestant, to come to good works by faith.³

We, Methodists, accept both Catholic and Lutheran's perspectives on

¹ <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/newtestament/section6.rhtml>

² <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/justification-faith-alone-martin-luther-and-romans-117/>

³ <http://www.the-highway.com/articleJan98.html>

God's righteousness, God's grace as a gift of God and a process in which we are called to live our lives. These are Justifying and Sanctifying grace in our Methodism. There is also a third perspective on grace. We call this prevenient grace. John Wesley, our Methodism founder was an Anglican priest and found himself in great despair. He did not have the faith to continue to preach. When death stared him in the face, he was fearful and found little comfort in his religion. He cried out to God praying, "Lord, help my unbelief." In this cry, Methodists learned of Prevenient grace, in which the Holy Spirit enters into his heart. One evening he reluctantly attended a meeting in Aldersgate. Someone read from Luther's *Preface to the Epistle to Romans*. Wesley felt a change in which God was working in his heart through faith in Christ. He felt his heart strangely warmed and trust in Christ. Christ alone for salvation. And Wesley felt he was given an assurance that Christ had taken away his sins, and saved him from the law of sin and death. It took him some time to learn how to live the life of faith, for he was not always possessed of joy and thought he had fallen from salvation. **It took time for him to see that it is not Christ and good works, but Christ alone who saves, resulting in good works.**⁴ These are important ideas in our understanding of grace as Methodists. We believe in Prevenient grace, Justifying grace and Sanctifying grace.

Even though each Christian tradition has theological differences, there is a common ground in Christian faith. That is the gift of God's Grace in Jesus Christ. We receive God's grace in Jesus Christ by faith. Christian faith is something that we cannot own, but when we learn how to live in hope, trusting in God, we realize that we already have faith inside us. Apostle Paul, Martin Luther and John Wesley were able to experience God's grace in Jesus Christ by faith and found strength to go on their lives with boldness and confidence. The gift of grace through Christ Jesus will connect us to God and enables us to live life without fear but with hope for everlasting life. This is the great promise and blessed assurance that Jesus promised. Our life journey is not an easy road. There are many barriers, challenges, stumbling blocks waiting. We may stumble over and experience failures on our trials, but we will never be in despair and overcome because we know that God is with us and guides our journey. We will go on and live life by faith and righteousness . Amen.

⁴ <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1701-1800/john-wesleys-heart-strangely-warmed-11630227.html>