

Sermon for Sunday, November 1, 2009

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BEING SAINTS
Romans 3:25-31

Today is All Saints Day, the day in which the church celebrates the life of faith. Some branches of the church celebrate individuals who have done extraordinary things. Others look to the lives of ordinary people of God who live each day in the light of the Gospel that makes us saints. If you believe today, you are a saint in the sight of God. And being a saint calls us to stake our lives on a certain set of truths, then live according to their truth.

Romans 3:25 God presented him [Christ] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished--²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.²⁷ Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith.²⁸ For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.²⁹ Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too,³⁰ since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.³¹ Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.

What is a saint? In the Bible saints are those who have been set apart to be like God, those who have been made holy, not by our action, but by God's action. It isn't bestowed on us for our extraordinary life. If the blood of Jesus covers us, we are made saints because of Jesus' extraordinary life and death. But grasping that truth and living that way is challenging, isn't it.

I took Emma Kathryn to see "Where the Wild Things Are" a couple weeks ago. This famous book has been turned into a wonderful movie...but perhaps better for older kids. When Missy asked Emma Kathryn what she thought, she responded, "Mommy, that movie was inappropriate for children." Then she ran off to play. So be warned.

In the story, Max runs away to live on an island with the Wild Things. As he arrives, he asserts himself as King, ruler of all the other monsters, because he has magical powers. But what we know is that Max is pretending! He has no magical powers. What will the wild things do when they find out?

A hint is given when one of the wild things offers up a bit of historical detail. They were upset with other would-be kings because the kings never could do what they promised. They never fulfilled the hope of glory all the people had for the king. So they ate all of them. What would happen with Max? It certainly scared him.

You know, that's what we in church can do. Like the monsters, we have hopes and expectations of others and terrorize them with these expectations, especially if we are so bold as to call someone saint. Because of course a saint is supposed to be a little king, looking like the big King Jesus. If they can't live up to the weight of the one whose mark we bear, then we grow impatient or even angry.

But we must realize the force of this passage. There is only one King. Jesus. He is the one who never lets us down, never fails to deliver on his promises. And all of us as his children are saints.

What makes us saints? It certainly isn't that our lives are perfect, or can live up to all the hopes, dreams, or expectations of the people around us. It is the blood of Jesus that makes us a saint, and calls us to live in light of that true thing about us. The life of a saint is driven by God's grace.

I. Being a Saint comes through the Gift of God.

Paul says in verse 25 that Jesus is a sacrifice of atonement. Why is atonement necessary, certainly a sacrifice of atonement? Culture may say this is a foolish idea. Only capricious gods deserve to be placated. Is the God of the Bible beholden to fits of rage? No, not at all. But the God of the Bible is rightfully filled with hatred toward sin. It, after all, is a parasite on His kingdom. It desires to wreck what He made and called good. Genesis 3:19 says God formed us from dust and we return to dust. Imagine a God who digs His hands into the mud to form us and breathe His life into us, crafting us in His image. Yet by our sin and rebellion, that image is marred and the dust crumbles. The glory faded and the promise of who we could be as kings in this world shattered. God, of course, is filled with wrath. His creation that is a reflection of Himself is marred! And it's our fault.

So Christ is set forth as a sacrifice of atonement, i.e., a means of laying aside God's wrath. Our sin is deserving of God's anger and condemnation, and this sacrifice of atonement in Christ has turned that anger aside - removed it.

Who is doing the setting aside of wrath? Verse 26 says God does it. He presented Christ. Culture may say we need to set aside wrath. If we offend someone, it is up to us to make it up, to make it better, to repair the relationship. It is all up to us. We have to somehow bribe or make offering of a better life, or a new year's resolution or something to make up for it. Some sort of trade: forgiveness for a better life. But the gospel says that's not true with God. Rather, God presented Christ on our behalf so that His wrath is appeased. It is His wrath that must be set aside, and it was His plan to do it.

It was done to demonstrate His justice. Paul makes the argument that in the cross, the mercy and justice of God come together, historically and personally. In the past, God graciously and mercifully passed over sins, i.e., He did not immediately punish them. That isn't because the sins in the past didn't deserve punishment, but simply reveals His mercy.

He must deal with sin and rebellion, and in His justice He will. Yet He temporarily overlooked the sin of the past in order to deal with it in Christ. The cross unites the longing for mercy and the promise of justice. Instead of in the past people immediately receiving their punishment for sin, or even us receiving punishment for sin immediately, He is pleased to lay that guilt on someone else, on Jesus. In this way He maintains His justice against rebellion, yet justifies us in His mercy.

To be justified has been described by people in different ways, including "just as if I'd never sinned". However clever that is, the news is actually better. To be justified is to be permanently and eternally declared to be clean and holy before God, received by faith. It isn't that justification puts us into a position where we could dirty our souls again by our sin; it actually proclaims that we are now and forever will be holy, clean, received, acceptable by God our Father. Why? Because Jesus took the full measure of my punishment and your punishment upon himself in the cross and declares us clean.

How do we access that justification? Faith alone in Christ alone, should be watchwords for saints on this All Saints Day. Too often, as evangelicals we live differently than this verse calls us to live, that is by faith in Christ. We live by placing faith in our faith, in the quality of our faith.

I grew up in some ways by putting faith in faith, my faith. I can't ever remember not believing that I am a sinner and Christ is my savior. Perhaps some of you can identify with that. But in my context growing up that seemed too fuzzy, unclear. We needed a moment, a day, in which I could mark the transfer from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. Now I believe that is true; one day we are dead in our sins, then we are made alive by the Spirit, and we are in the kingdom of light. That is true. But you and I may not be able to identify the exact moment when that happens.

And for some that is really unsettling. Notwithstanding that God knows when it happened for certain...what about me? So I was told to write in my Bible the date and time when I was converted, and then converted again and again. See, whenever I felt the conviction of the Holy Spirit, I doubted the reality of my earlier conversion. Why? Because I was putting faith in my faith. I was placing hope in the quality of my faith rather than in Christ, the object of my faith. I was focused on having a moment I could pinpoint as the beginning of my spiritual pilgrimage, keeping my eyes and heart trained on that date that was so shaky rather than keeping my eyes trained on the Christ who saved me.

If we have faith in the quality of our faith, we will always and necessarily be disappointed. Because our faith isn't nearly as sure as Christ is sure. We don't put our faith in a sinner's prayer, or some sort of measurable thing to mark spiritual life. Jesus marks our spiritual life. Keep your heart trusting in Jesus, who justifies you and me. Richard Hooker, a 16th century minister said, "God justifies the believer—not because of the worthiness of his belief, but because of his (i.e. Christ) worthiness who is believed."¹

II. The Effect of a Life of Faith on Being Saints

Here Paul turns our attention to some implications of the life of faith, what the Reformation celebrates as being saved *by grace alone through faith alone*.

When I was a kid, prisms fascinated me. Maybe you were and perhaps still are like that. I loved how light could be bent by passing through this piece of glass; the light could be diffused, the spectrum of different colors produced by the light seen. Indeed, the direction of the light can be shifted through this glass. I would play with prisms for hours.

Paul wants us to see that the cross is a prism for our lives. It changes the direction of our lives, gives our lives a new shape, a life characterized by the beauty and majesty of being justified by God. And Paul helps us to see this shape by asking us a series of questions. They are intended for us to answer them within our own souls, and ask, is my life bent toward the gratitude that comes with the gift of the cross?

The Effect of a Life of Faith: Saints Aren't Boasters.

Paul asks in verse 27, "Where then is boasting?" And answers: "It is excluded". Jews boasted in Paul's day over several things. One major point of pride is that they were God's chosen, special people. He had set His affection on them, given them His law, being a treasured possession of God. They belonged to God: culturally, nationally, religiously.

Also, there was a personal self-righteous dimension to all these external benefits of being God's people. There was an internal pride in accomplishment and achievement. The problem was that some of these folks boasted in their obedience, as half-hearted and incomplete as any offer of obedience to perfection can be. This law-keeping became a means of establishing or maintaining a relationship with God.²

¹ Cited in Stott, *Romans* (IVP, 1994), p. 118.

² Moo, Douglas. *Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1996) p. 247.

We all are boasters; each one of us. As Americans, we boast in our worship of our gods. For some of us, our attempts at obedience in the Christian life feed self-centered pride. We begin to compare ourselves to other people who we perceive don't do life as well as we do.

Others boast in worship of the god of success. "Look how important I am by my job". We never say it out loud, but we may demand certain privileged treatment because of how important or successful we are. We boast in whatever we think makes us significant in this world.

Think about this past week. What made you feel a swell of pride that went just a bit too far, such that you began to feel superior to other people? Was it catching someone in a mistake, even celebrating someone else's failure in a twisted way? Then it could be that your god of boasting is in "being right." And boasting in being right will reap havoc on your relationships with others, and with God.

Because faith, Paul says, destroys our boastful pride. When we place trust in Christ, Paul says when we acknowledge our salvation, our being right and just and acceptable in this world has nothing to do with our performance according to a religious standard. It is according to what Jesus has done. We are declared righteous because of his work. Our profession is that we are sinners, broken to the core. Yet, Christ has saved us; we can't save ourselves.

If we can't save ourselves, what do we have left to boast in? If our core is tainted with sin and sinful motives, are we really better than the next guy? There is something inherently wrong with a person professing to be a sinner saved by grace...yet take credit for that goodness and grace in a boastful or prideful way. We boast in what makes us significant. And our significance and value in this world doesn't come from being right, or being successful, or being relatively a good person. It comes from Jesus who was all that for us, unto perfection. We boast in the cross and live by faith.

One implication is being honest about our sin and need for the cross. For example, there are marriages in trouble in our church. The struggling economy and other factors reveal cracks already present, leaving husbands and wives to ask again, "Why did I marry this person?" There is no wisdom in keeping it secret. Trying to keep our sin hidden and need of the cross out of view is a kind of boasting that we are better than we really are.

Let me say it a different way. A life of faith calls us to a deep humility. Because when I look at your life and see sin and issues, I know that I have them as well; sin issues, brokenness. Both of us are redeemed by the blood of the cross. At the foot of the cross, all of us stand shoulder to shoulder. All are needy; that is what the cross means.

On this All Saints Day, you, believer, are a saint, being made so by God's grace alone through faith alone.

The Effect of Faith: Saints Are Welcomers

In verse 29, Paul asks, "Is God the God of the Jews only?" As the covenant people of God, the Jews were especially proud. They were the ones entrusted with the temple, the promises, the law. In fact, the Jews of the time believed that God was the God of the Gentiles only by virtue of creation, while the Jews were His precious possession with meaningful relationship.³

Yet, Paul instructed them not to rely on any of this privilege as a place for boasting, or indulging pride. Rather, they forgot that the purpose for all this privilege was to be a light unto the nations. As God revealed to Abraham, through his family all the nations of the world would be blessed. They forgot that

³ Moo, p. 251.

their blessing was to be stewarded; their privilege was given as a means of inviting other nations into that meaningful relationship with God. It was NEVER intended as a means of excluding the nations of the earth. No, Paul continued that “God was the God of the Gentiles too.”

The seed of the promise to Abraham is fulfilled in Jesus, who brings salvation to all who believe. Abraham’s faith was credited to him as righteousness. Paul now makes the argument that it is not circumcision (religious ceremony) or uncircumcision (turning your back on religion) that is the key distinction. The issue is that we are saved through faith, placing our hope and trust on Jesus. That is true for the Jew, the religious person, and the Gentile, the irreligious person.

This is the point: In Christ we come to salvation; there is no room for elitism or excluding others who believe from the family of faith. The cross is the great leveler of mankind. And because of the work of Christ, and a life of faith, we are free to welcome other people into a community of faith in Jesus.

Now this is fine on its face, but do we really live this way? If we do, our lives will begin to be characterized by the spirit of a welcoming community of missionaries. Is this our community? If God is the God of the religious and the pagan, all invited to Him by faith, by what means do we exclude people who look different from us, from our community?

If we truly lived this way, we would serve as missionaries in our neighborhoods, being outward facing, inviting people to consider the beauty of a life of faith in Jesus, instead of cloistering with ourselves all the time. I heard a church talk about each one reach one: each person in the congregation considering one person to not only speak to but live in front of them the good news of Christ, investing in them relationally. Could each one of us have eyes for one other person, to welcome them into the family of God through faith in Jesus?

Also, our church will begin to take on more of an outward face. Ministries faced toward the community, seeking ways to welcome the lost into an encounter Jesus. This is challenging because welcoming outsiders into a comfortable family can irritate us. We might see our favorite ministry or program shift from what is most likable to me in order to shine the light of Christ into the life of people who don’t know him. Our ministries may be less about us, and more and more using our gifts to reach others. It doesn’t have to be either or. We can be an outward-facing, disciple-making church! After all, that is the Great Commission.

Which groups does it feel most challenging to open your heart to? Poor? Other races? Uneducated? A different political perspective? God calls us into that difficulty. Why? Because we are saved in the same way a pagan somewhere in a remote part of the world or down the street in our neighborhood is saved: by placing our trust in Christ.

NT Wright said, “The message is simple: all who believe in Jesus belong to the same family and should be eating at the same table.”⁴

The Effect of Faith: Saints Work for Righteousness (31)

How could some read Paul’s theology to nullify the law? By saying the law given by God is unimportant, by charging him with no concern for the ethical commands of God. Paul says that receiving justification by faith does not reduce the law in importance, it simply puts it in its proper place.

⁴ Quoted in Stott, p. 120.

The law was never intended to give us life. That is Paul's teaching in Galatians. The law does three things. It serves as a mirror to reflect to us the brightness of God's holiness and the darkness of our heart of sin in comparison. In this way, it serves as our tutor to lead us to Jesus. When we see clearly our depravity and need, then the offer of the gospel is so much more beautiful. Secondly, it serves as a bridle, to restrict rampant sin in society. If we follow the commands of God, like no murder, no stealing, no adultery, then society as a whole would be healthier.

The third use of the law seems to be where Paul is going in this verse, the law as a lamp to guide the walking of our feet. It seems that whenever the Gospel is preached in all its fullness and free grace, with justification coming as God's initiative, saving rebellious sinners without regard to their performance, then a charge is levied. The charge is, so I guess I can do what I want, live how I want, since God's grace is so free. This is the objection Paul anticipates here and other places through Romans. And his resounding answer is: Absolutely not!

Rather, we establish the law by living by faith. He means it in this sense. If we are loving God with our hearts and living by faith, then our lives will be shaped by the law of that love. Our lives will be shaped and bent toward living according to the will and instruction of the one we love. In this sense, a saint's life is to reflect the life of his Savior, in a pursuit of holiness, obedience and passion for the things God is passionate about. Since we are saints, can we live however we want. NO! We live how our Savior wants!

Does God's grace give you license to ignore God's commands? No, his grace gives us freedom to embrace and follow his commands. His law becomes a lamp to guide our walk by faith, day in and day out. As a saint, we are not given license to sin and just expect the grace of forgiveness. Rather, we are freed by the cross from the grip sin has on our hearts. We are free to love God with our whole lives!

So back to the Wild Things. The Wild Things discerned that Max isn't a king and he doesn't have magical powers. Do you think he met the end promised to him: to be eaten? No, because the Wild Things figured out that although Max couldn't do everything he could promise, they still loved him for who he is. He had become their friend.

You and I aren't perfect. Only Jesus was in this life. But he loves us all the same. Why? Because he became our friend and savior, by giving of himself. You and I are saints on this All Saints Day. It happened because of the work of Jesus and it can't be removed. Let's turn toward the world, and live like saints in humility, with a welcoming heart, and a passion for righteousness.