

Sermon for Sunday, December 6, 2009
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PEACE. JOY. HOPE. LOVE – THE FRUIT OF FAITH
Romans 5:1-5

Christmas is an emotional time. These emotions vary from the happiest to the saddest. Children love the excitement of presents they receive on Christmas morning; they also love to give. They watch in anguish, awaiting the verdict etched in the face of mother, father, sister, brother – a puzzled look or a sunburst of a smile. But Christmas can be quite sad. In a quiet moment, we murmur, "So this is our first year without grandma..." Or we lament a broken relationship.

For the meditative, Christmas can be melancholy. Another year has passed. We know (as a poet said) that life is "No more durable than old customs, family rituals, Christmas tinsel, and once a year the hilarity of carols."¹

For the self-examining soul, Christmas brings ambivalence. "I have my desires; I've made my requests," we think, "but perhaps I should have asked my parents to donate a calf to a village in Burundi, in my name."

I hope you are happy. More important: I hope you are joyful, peaceful and hopeful this Christmas. There is reason to be, as Romans 5 shows.

Through Romans 3 and 4, Paul presented and illustrated the gospel. The sacrifice of Christ has atoned for our sins, so we are justified by faith in Christ. This holds for a man like Abraham who does great good and lives for God in courage and boldness. Even godly Abraham is justified by faith. It also holds for a man like David, who knowingly committed terrible sins and then tried to cover them up. Yet every sinner who repents and believes is justified.

In Romans 5 Paul moves beyond the need of the gospel and the content of the gospel to the fruit of the gospel. He presents the results, the blessed life that follows the gospel. His language is full of positive emotion. His language shifts; his tone is personal.

- As Romans opens, Paul uses the first person: "I long to see you" and "I am not ashamed of the gospel" (1:11, 16).
- When Paul describes the sins of the godless, he says "they" do evil.
- If people try to evade the problem of sin, he says "you" are responsible.
- Next, Paul says "he" as he describes the work of Jesus and Abraham (Romans 3-4).
- Finally, he says "we." We who believe share certain blessings - peace, joy, hope, and love ("We" appeared eleven times in first four chapters of Romans, sixteen times in 5:1-11!).

Romans 5 explores the blessed fruit of faith in Christ. Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God, access to God, a standing with Him. These are the logical consequences, the necessary results of faith in Christ. Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God.

Peacefulness is an emotional state, but in the Bible, peace is first "an objective status or condition" We were God's enemies, now we are at peace with Him. We see it in 5:10-11: "When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son... We also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation" and peace."

¹ C Milosz, 1945

Reconciliation is a consequence of justification. Justification and reconciliation are distinct, but inseparable. In the world of humans, a judge typically has no relationship with the accused. A judge may feel no personal hostility toward the guilty. And a judge probably feels no affection for the innocent. They certainly don't need to be friends

But God is different. If God the judge justifies us - declares us innocent and righteous - then He becomes our friend, which is what He always wanted. Our sin alienated us from Him. Since the time of Adam, when people sin, they run and hide from God. But believers need never hide from the Father.

Because our sin is atoned for and forgiven, we are reconciled to God. God "justifies the wicked" and credits faith "as righteousness" and He declares that He is at peace with us. Condition green.

As Isaiah said "He [Jesus] was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). Jesus brought us peace through the cross.

We should enjoy a sense or feeling of peace as a result. Not tension, not fear of rejection, not anxiety. God can't love you more than He already does. His love brings peace. Isaiah says: "[When] the Spirit is poured upon us... The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever. My people will live... in undisturbed places of rest" (Isaiah 32:15-18).

This comes "through our Lord Jesus Christ." It's a phrase Paul uses five times in this section of Romans, as he explores the benefits of redemption (5:1, 11, 21, 6:23, 8:39). He wants to make it clear – every benefit we have comes through Jesus.

Paul says, "We have peace with God" and it is ours, almost like a possession obtained. This fall, when it was raining every day, I noticed that my socks were wet one Monday. "How did that happen?" I wondered. But when they were wet again on Tuesday, I realized it might be my shoes. I took them off and saw that they were dead, slain by years on remorseless cement sidewalks. I bought a new pair of shoes. I wore them to work next day; my feet were comfortable and dry.

We know people like to let their new shoes sit on a shelf for a few weeks before they wear them. Others want to wear things the moment they come from the box. I take no position on shoes, but I'm sure the Lord wants us to use what is ours. We have peace, therefore we should live in peace.

Let's distinguish. We have peace with God through Christ. But we don't always feel the peace of God. Our peace with God rests in Christ and cannot be destroyed. But peace as subjective experience can be disrupted.

How then can we live in peace? It's wise to distinguish between superficial reasons and deep causes of tension. The superficial is important - worth considering. In the Christmas season, it's all too easy to lose our peace.

- We spend too much time on food preparation and house decoration.
- We fret about gifts. We're tempted both to do too much – in an effort to demonstrate love - and to do too little, because shopping is hard, money tight.
- We go to so many parties and programs that we're never at home and we resent it. But the concerts are good and our friends are at the party, so...
- As a child, Christmas was perfect; you want to live up to that. Or as a child, Christmas was terrible. You want to do it right for your family.

These tensions merely add to the ways we lose peace all year. I will mention two - worry and anger. These, I believe, often rise from deeper sources.

We tend to worry about our idols - not the sort made of stone, the sort that dwell in the heart. We worry when we fear loss. If there is anything that would lead us to say, "If I don't have that, life isn't

worth living" then we probably worry about that thing – our health, our job or wealth; our spouse, child, or friend. Jesus says we shouldn't worry about tomorrow, which we can't control anyway. Besides, if God "did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (8:32).

We also get angry when something or someone threatens our idols. Two things really tempt me to get angry. The first is cruelty to children. The second, has to do with my fiercest idol, which you might not guess for a long time. It's good in itself, but somehow it became too important to me. And when our idols are threatened, peace leaves us. So justification gives us peace.

Peace among world religions ²

A major goal of the worlds' philosophies and religions is to find tranquility, relief from anxieties, fears, anger, guilt, and inadequacy. People want to know where they can find peace. Jesus often met people who were "distracted, troubled, anxious, worried, fearful." They sought peace and Jesus granted it.

- Jesus forgave a sinful woman and said, "Your faith has saved you, go in peace" (Luke 7:50).
- Again: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29)
- "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27).
- Paul offered peace: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father" (Romans 1:7).

Peace is more than mental calm and better than indifference. No, he came to upset the complacent: "Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division" (Luke 12:51). Still, peace is a component of the Christian life.

The sources of emotional turmoil are easy to identify: We are anxious when we feel insecure. We grieve when we lose (or seem to lose) something dear to us. We are angry when someone mistreats us or shows disrespect, when someone frustrates us or offends our dignity. We feel guilty when we do something that we recognize as a moral failure.

There is a quick but incorrect answer to each of these emotional upsets. Go and solve the problem that causes your distress. Remove the obstacle to peace

- Find peace – end your anxiety – by doing what it takes to become secure.
- Find peace – end your anger - by demanding justice. Or get revenge. Punish whoever offended you.
- Find peace in the face of guilt by doing good rather than evil.

These look like good ideas, but they're simplistic. We can't simply work our way to peace by removing every source of distress. Security is elusive. There is always some threat. Justice and revenge don't bring peace. The attempt to settle scores often brings more violence, more anxiety. And we will never simply "do good."

Seeing this, great religions thinkers and philosophers have proposed paths to peace even if we cannot get everything we want. Essentially, they propose that we find peace by mitigating our frustrations.

Buddhism: Find peace by cessation of desire. Stop desiring. Stop thinking of self. Ultimately, lose self-awareness.

Stoicism: Take an impersonal view of things. Don't look at loss from a selfish perspective. View

² See Robert Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions*, pages 165-77

things from the perspective of the universe. You lost your girl, but someone else won her! Your army lost the war, but take heart, another army won! This doesn't work because the self disappears! We are alive; God created us to have desires, passions, and goals. To give them up is to lose part of our humanity.

Our concept of peace is richer by far. First, it's a relationship with God. Second, it's concord in human relationships. Third, it's a comprehensive state of salvation. It is "wholeness and integrity that conforms to the state of righteousness, prosperity, harmony and fulfillment."³

Access

Justification also gives us access to God. Paul says that through Christ, "we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand" (Romans 5:2). That is, peace with God creates access to God. Access means we are introduced or led into God's presence so that we now stand before him without fear. By faith we gained access into this grace in which we now stand. "Grace" here means not the gift or the disposition itself, but the status that is the result of it. By grace we can come and stand peacefully before God.

Years ago, a friend of mine had an accident while driving at dusk on a rainy road (story is true - details are changed; you can't identify the person). It was his fault. He didn't notice a stop sign at the bottom of a hill. He braked late and skidded into the car ahead of him – a patrol car. The officer was perturbed and wrote a stiff ticket that led to traffic court.

My friend was very nervous about this and asked me to come along for support. He planned to plead guilty; but he wanted the judge to know he wasn't reckless. He had a distraught friend with him in the car. No surprise, he was distracted. He was going to pull over shortly. This was his first accident. He's ordinarily very careful, and so on.

The moment came; my friend walked before the judge to plead "Guilty with an explanation" But he froze. He opened his mouth; nothing came out. He tried again. A cloud of dust drifted off his tongue. He made a choking sound "Ah. Agghh." He looked like he wanted to fall through the floor. So I spoke for him "Your honor, he did hit that car, but it was a rainy night..." The judge had such mercy as the law allowed.

Now God is the judge of all flesh. As he surveys our life, we are guilty of more than distracted driving. But we have a friend, an advocate, Jesus. He speaks for us. He doesn't plead "Guilty with an explanation." Rather "Innocent with an explanation. Yes, this man, this woman, did much that is wrong and deserves punishment for it. But I've paid for all the damage, all his mistakes. More, I atoned for all his sins."

In real life, the judge might dismiss such a case because it solved the legal problem. After that the judge and accused might never see each other again. But not God the judge. He wants a relationship with us. Imagine, therefore, that it's traffic court again. After the judge acquits the driver, he invites him up to the bench. "Come on up here and give me a hug. Have a bite of my quesadilla. Now, tomorrow morning I'm free; there's a creek I know where the fishing is good and the scenery is better. Will you go with me? We leave my house at 7:00."

Paul says it this way: "Through faith in [Christ] we may approach God with freedom and confidence" (Ephesians 3:12). We can approach so confidently because "Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Peter 3:18).

This is the problem: God has a just and fierce wrath toward sin. Humans, by themselves, are unrepentant. Indeed, we tend to be hostile, indifferent or arrogant toward him. We are headed for a

³ Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions*, pages 171-2

collision with a force far greater than ourselves. Nonetheless, with great love and at great cost to Himself, God removed our sin and guilt and made peace with us. As a result, we have access to Him.

Hebrews 4:16 describes our access to God this way: "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." We need not panic, we do tremble speechlessly. We come to a throne of grace.

Notice two traits of our access to God: It is both direct and effective. Direct means we don't need to hire a guide or find a mediator to smooth the way to God. Jesus himself has introduced us to the king. Of course, it is beneficial to have friends or leaders with us in our Christian life. But we don't need anyone beyond Jesus. He has opened the door to heaven.

Our access is also effective. Here is a story from Martin Luther. Luther had a good friend and assistant named Frederick Myconius. One day Myconius became very sick; he was expected to die shortly. On his bed he wrote a loving farewell note to Luther. When Luther received it, he sat down to write. He commanded Myconius to live in the name of God: "I still have need of you in the work of reforming the church. The Lord will never let me hear that you are dead, but will permit you to survive me... "This I pray. This I wish. My will be done... for the glory of God's name."⁴

When Luther's letter arrived, Myconius was too weak even to speak. Yet in a short while he began to recover. He lived six more years, two months longer than Luther. This is a bold claim of the access that is ours through Christ. Maybe more would happen if we prayed that way once in a while.

Peace, access to God, and the grace in which we stand are objective realities, based on the acts of Christ. Because we have objective peace with God, we stand before him. But there are more benefits of justification.

3. Joy

Justification brings us joy. "We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" (Romans 5:2). The word translated "rejoice" is not the most common. It means something like jubilation or exultation. It's a loud or overflowing expression that so strong, some might think you're bragging. But this is no ordinary celebration. We celebrate the hope of the glory of God. In the New Testament, "hope for the glory of God" usually means hope in His return. Hear it in Titus 2:13: "We wait for the blessed hope — the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ." Today we are pilgrims, but we cherish our future.

So then know and embrace your privileges. Own the peace, access and joy that is ours through our justification.

⁴ T. G. Tappert, *Martin Luther*, pages 47-50