

Romans 3:21-31
Title
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Why don't you just go ahead and admit who you really are? It's a question that invites us into honest and sobering reflection. Who am I? What is this life that I've constructed for myself? To quote Judge Smailes from the movie *Caddyshack*: How do you measure myself against other golfers? By height? It's a question that if we are courageous enough to confront, will not only lead us to the end of our selves, but will also lead you to the only place where hope and promise reside.

This fall, as we look forward to a milestone celebration not only in church history, but in world and civilization history, the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation we are looking at the high water marks of the Christian Faith. Today we are looking at what the father of Reformed Christianity, John Calvin called "the hinge on which all religion turns" (Institutes 3.11.1). Justification is by faith alone, *Sola Fide*.

St Paul wrote the book of Romans to a church that he had planned to visit in his missionary journey, he had never met them though. The Letter reads like this majestic, soaring, theological explication of the Christian Faith, but really it was Paul's letter of recommendation to them *for Paul*. In his missionary journeys throughout the Middle East and Asia Minor, Paul wrote letters addressing growth edges in churches. Conflict in Corinth, Jewish/Christian relationship in Galatia, and perseverance in Philippi. He'd never been to Rome and had no issue to address with them, other than there being his last stop before turning his ministry towards Europe/Spain. He did it to gain their support, but also to help these new Christians living in the cultural and political epicenter of the world understand this Gospel Paul was so utterly captivated by.

And the heart of the matter for Paul is this question: how is it that we humans justify our existence? In a world filled with varying narratives about the gods relationship to humans, the prevailing wisdom is: we justify our very existence by what we do. There's a line from the movie *Chariots of Fire* that captures this mindset. Harold Abrahams says: "I raise my eyes and look down that corridor; 4 feet wide, with 10 lonely seconds to justify my whole existence." Our life is short and we only have so long to validate our place here.

You see for the Romans, and for us as well, righteousness is a validating performance record that opens doors. So for example, if you want a job you take out your resume with all your accomplishments and experiences. It says to a potential employer this means I'm worthy, accept me. Or if you want to gain entrance into a social circle you will present list of virtues: humor, experiences, your socioeconomic place, and say "I'm worthy, accept me."

In a life that is apart from God we will relentlessly try to justify and validate our existence by what we are able to do. We become an amalgamation of all of the ways we attempt to construct a life for ourselves. Every religion around the world is based on this performance record model. If I work hard enough and become righteous enough, I will be accepted. But the problem is that there is this mysterious and ever elusive standard of righteousness that makes it impossible for us to know, what is righteousness look like?

Except Christianity. What Paul spends the first 3 chapters of Romans laying out is a standard of righteousness that is laid out in the law. If you keep the commands perfectly you will be perfect, but if not, then your righteousness will fall short and you will be deserving of judgment. Paul was getting ready to visit a city that was built entirely upon humanity's ability to be master of their domain.

DEEP DOWN WE UNDERSTAND HOW IMPOSSIBLE IT IS TO JUSTIFY OURSELVES. WE ARE ALWAYS SURROUNDED BY THE EVIDENCE OF HOW INADEQUATE WE ARE. NO MATTER HOW HARD WE TRY IT ALWAYS ELUDES US.

As a 19 year old college student I came to understand this reality in a profound way. As a new college student looking for community and identity and approval in a totally new environment, I found myself seeking to justify myself among my baseball teammates and coaches. If I could prove that I was worthy of a place in the lineup, I would gain approval; if I went out of my way to accommodate others needs, I would gain approval; if I could only win the approval of these people my place my existence there would be validated.

Problem was, it was like the ever-elusive mirage that looks so close, but is actually infinitely out of reach. The harder I tried to validate my identity to these people through my performance record, the further away their acceptance and approval was.

This is the paradox to which the Reformers spoke. This perfect righteousness through the law that God placed before us as the standard, is utterly impossible for us to attain. The harder we try to be righteous by God's standards, the more we realize that it is forever out of reach. The more we try to earn or deserve the life that we live, the more it slips away from us. The more we reach, the more we climb, the more grasp, the further we fall. When John Calvin said that Justification was the hinge on which religion turns what he meant was just this, the life of faith can never be lived like this (clenched fist), it can only ever be received (open palms).

Then Paul says in chapter 3 verse 21, "But now." Once you have realized how incapable you are of gaining your own righteousness, you are ready for the turn—"But now" is the turn. But now, the righteousness of the law has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

The Gospel message is this: perfect righteousness, as if you had never sinned ever, has been imparted to you. When you look in the mirror what you should see is not the tired, ragged, sin soaked life we create for ourselves. What you should see, and what God sees is Jesus' perfect, sinless, holy, righteousness enveloping you like a garment. We put on Christ and his righteousness becomes our righteousness. And what do we do, what must we say or think or achieve to be the recipients of such great news, you believe in faith, and its yours.

Again Calvin writes: he or she who grasps the righteousness of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appears in God's sight not as a sinner but as a righteous person.

I may have told you this story before, but the moment in my life when God's grace and justification became real to me coincided with my strivings for approval among my teammates. You see I hit rock bottom in my efforts when the group I had worked so hard to gain the approval of left me out to dry—I'm not sure they intended it or realized it. But one Friday evening I found myself in my

dorm and I was alone to the world, I felt completely disconnected, completely spent, void of the approval and meaning I had sought to create myself. My efforts to create the life I thought was mine had failed.

And yet in that same moment I heard this sound (You've got mail). I opened the email and it was an invitation from a guy who lived across the hall from me freshman year to join a bible study with he and four other guys from our floor. When I was lost to myself, Jesus found me. The irony is that I had known these guys were there, but in my relentless attempts to create the life I thought was right I had missed the grace that was standing right in front of me.

Now the approval I had worked so hard to attain was given to me in full, not because of who I was or what I could do, but because of who Christ is, and what Christ says about us.

Justification by faith alone means so much more than just you are forgiven. Forgiven means that punishment is withheld. Justification by faith means that we are invited to come into the very presence of the Holy God, because we are the recipients and bearers of Jesus' righteousness. And the only way that comes is through faith.

The truth of the Gospel is that you are already justified before God through the faithfulness. I included a quote from Karl Barth in the bulletin, he says 'nevertheless' you who were dead in your trespasses, dead in your endless striving to create life on your own...nevertheless God declares himself to be God for us in Jesus Christ.

And it is he who has spoken decisively over you in his final words from the cross: "it is finished."

The relentless busybodiness is finished

The insatiable need for approval of others is finished

The frenetic desire to gain the affirmations of others is finished.

The self-constructed life is finished.

The righteousness we gain on our own is finished.

So why don't you just go ahead and admit who you really are? Or better yet, why don't you just go ahead and receive the identity that's already yours in Christ? All it takes is sola fide, faith alone.