

A Sunday School teacher wanted to help her students understand the Gospel better, and she also wanted to try to explain some of those big, Biblical words to her class. So she asked the boys and girls what the word "justification" meant. Everything got really, really quiet. But then, one of the kid's eyes lit up as he volunteered, "It means God loves me just-if-I'd never sinned." God loves me just as if I'd never sinned. That little guy had his theology screwed on straight.

The Apostle Paul uses the word a little differently, but he is in full agreement with our Sunday Schooler. He wrote to the Galatian Christians, "we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ." Paul uses the word "justified" as a declaration. It is the announcement of a verdict. And the verdict is: Not Guilty. Or, "just-if-I'd" never sinned. That verdict is the product of Jesus living out the sentence of a guilty verdict on the cross. When a person, when you believe that Jesus went through that on your behalf, in your place, so that you would not have to, at that moment you are declared 'not guilty,' and it is just as if you'd never sinned. Amazing.

But really, what does it matter? What does this have to do with my everyday life? This has everything to do with everything about your life. You want to know how? Let's go.

Last week Pastor Ken quoted from the book of Micah to say that God pardons and passes over sins and tramples them underfoot because of Jesus, that He was the Difference Maker. Two weeks ago I talked about the two ladders, the Religion of Law and the Religion of Grace. These ideas pour out of the letter to the Galatians, and it continues today. "We know that a person is not justified by works of the Law but through faith in Jesus Christ." Do you realize how unusual this is? It's a total reversal of what you normally find in religion. To review:

Religion of Law:      1. Believe in God      2. Obey      3. Be saved

Religion of Grace:    1. Believe in Jesus.    2. Be saved    3. Obey

In other words, do you obey God so that you will be loved and accepted by Him and maybe get His blessings? Or do you know you're accepted and loved right now, because of Jesus, therefore you obey? This may sound like I'm just playing games with words, but it's not. This is a game changer. If we don't get this right, we don't get Christianity right. Bottom Line.

As much as it pains me to say this, there are people who go to church are stuck in the Religion of Law. I'm not talking specifically about St. Mark, I'm talking about the church at large, but, if the shoe fits...How do you know if you're stuck in the Religion of Law? Well this is kind of like Jeff Foxworthy. If you are consistently anxious and overcome with worry, you might be stuck in the Religion of Law. Why is that? Because deep inside you feel like you've done enough good that bad things shouldn't be happening to you. If you routinely look down on other people, you might be stuck in the religion of Law. How come? Because you are comparing your performance to someone else's. If your life with God is joyless and flat, you might be stuck in the Religion of Law. Why? Because you feel you should be getting more from God for what you put in. If being

in God's Word and going to church and being a Christian seems like a burden, you might be stuck in the Religion of Law. If cultivating a relationship with God is something you feel you've got to do--or else, rather than something you get to do, it's not 'you might be stuck,' you are stuck in the Religion of Law. You don't really understand what has been done for you. All these things are symptoms of the human heart thinking, "I have to justify myself." And it all leads to a dead end.

What's the alternative? It's the Religion of Grace. It's the Gospel; the announcement from God that, from His perspective, you are crucified with Christ. When you believe, you are united with Jesus. That means God sees you as free from condemnation, as if you had died on that cross for your sins. Your sins are paid for. And from His bench, the Judge declares you and me "Not Guilty." It's just-if-I'd never sinned.

But that's just the beginning of what Jesus is up to. You also get His righteousness, which is a way of saying that His perfect record goes into your file. You're in Him. On one hand, God has treated Christ on the cross as if he had done everything you have done; and He treats you as if you have done everything Jesus has done. All the honor, all the glory, it's like all his medals are pinned to your chest.

Someone who felt this at an extremely deep level was Martin Luther. As a monk, Martin Luther tried very, very hard to live according to the Law of God, but he knew he failed. And when he was studying the book of Romans because he had to teach it, he got to a place in the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter where everything began to hit him like an earthquake, and this is what he wrote: "I tried to understand Paul's epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way, but that one expression: 'the righteousness of God,' because I took it to mean that it was the justice whereby God punishes the unjust. And my situation was, I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him [that my goodness would keep him from punishing me]. Night and day I pondered, and then I saw, the righteousness of God is that righteousness that by sheer grace and mercy, God gives us."

You see, Luther himself had thought that Christianity was about creating a righteous record and giving it to God who then rewards you. But ultimately he recognized Christianity is about a perfect, right record that God creates for us and gives to us. And this is what he said:

"I felt myself to be reborn, and to have gone through open doors to Paradise. When I discovered that the Law is one thing and the Gospel another, I broke through."

Question: Have you broken through? Virtually everybody has to break through, or keep breaking through. Breaking through of the idea that righteousness is a good record that you give to God; breaking into the idea that Jesus creates the perfect record and gives it to you. It creates two totally different kinds of lives. Have you broken through?

How does it function in your life?

The gospel goes after your heart, and it re-orders your loves. I saw an article once by Tony Schwartz called "The Enduring Hunt for Personal Value." "Our shared core hunger as human

beings is for value. We desperately want to matter and feel a sense of worthiness.” Why is it desperate? We fear we don’t have value. Then what do you do? You’re going to find places and things that seem to give that to you. One way is to look at other people that are different and you feel you’re better. You despise them, you look down at them, you feel superior. This is one way to give yourself worthiness. Career is another way: “Look at me, I’m successful.” That gives you sense that you matter. Romance is another way. I need to feel needed and desired and that gives my life meaning. In every case what’s happening there is you’re trying to justify yourself. You’re trying to say I matter. I have significance. You’re going to look to something or someone to do it.

The gospel is the only form of worthiness that is not achieved it is received. It is based on Jesus’ record. The gospel is the end of your desperate hunt to matter. Jesus thinks you matter so much, He died for you! It is the end of your struggle to have worthiness, because you have Jesus’ worthiness.

Oh, but wait. Some of you might be thinking, I know these words. Gospel. Justification. Redemption. I’ve been coming to church for years. But the fact of the matter is, I am driven by my work, I do find myself in bad relationships because I need to be needed, I do struggle with feeling superior to people different than me. I know the words but I have these struggles.

Let me tell you, if you had the misfortune of speaking with the apostle Paul one on one, he would say you believe the gospel in your head, but it has not penetrated your heart. Up here you say “I’m justified not by works, but by faith in Jesus” but down here you are being justified by works, you’re doing it through your efforts. You’re trying to. The reason you can’t break off the relationship, the reason you’re working too hard, the reason you’re up and down all the time, is up here you say one thing and down here it’s another.

If it’s true that we are all sinners saved by grace, so that we’re all equally sinful and all equally in Christ, you don’t have the right to feel superior to anybody else, but more importantly you don’t have the need. You have the love of the King. Pray that love into your heart until you are released from these things.

All the change that your heart needs and that your life needs is through praying, worshipping, and rejoicing in what Jesus has done for you. This goes far beyond saying the words, “Jesus dies for my sins,” and boom, you’re done. End of transaction. This means thinking through the implications of what Jesus has done for you--weighing His love for you against anything else that you think is going to fill you up.

I love what Paul says here in verse 20: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” This is true of every Christian. There’s a sense in which you go into Christ and disappear. You are seen in the beauty of Jesus. No longer do you need to look at anything else and say, “If I have that, now I feel worth, now I feel value.” No. I’m in Jesus. He’s my life, worth and value. And when Jesus is your ultimate thing, the good things in life don’t own you like they used to.

Here’s just one real life example: A woman once spent years getting into a series of bad relationships with men because she needed to be needed until the gospel of Jesus changed her.

She said she was finally able to have good relationships because she would say in her heart, "You know what? It would be great to date you. It would be great to be in a relationship with you. But you will never be my life. Christ is my life. I will never find my value and my worthiness in you. I found it in Jesus." Before, she was using romantic relationships to get a sense of value; now, with Jesus giving her worth, she could enter a relationship from a place of health and balance.

The gospel changes everything. We are not trying to make people more moral. More religious. More "like us." We want to expose people to the life-changing power of grace. We want people to break through. We want to be people who are captivated and motivated by the news that God loves me just-if-I'd never sinned. Have you broken through?