

"When Grace Breaks In"

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Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Romans 5:1-5)

Many people do not know that the famous reformer Martin Luther spent most of his life drowning in guilt. Being faithful to God was the most important thing in his life, but he just could not seem to do it. There was always a way that he fell short. Each time he did, he pledged to try harder. But he still failed. He became obsessed over confession, going to a priest multiple times a day for absolution. But as soon as he stepped out of the booth, he would think of sins he had forgotten to name. An inescapable truth became more and more obvious: he was powerless over sin. It did not matter what he did or how hard he tried. He could not avoid sinning.

Once he realized he could no longer deny this problem, he experienced all the classical stages of grief. The first was anger. He began to see God as just a mean and vindictive overlord, a master who could never be appeased. "I could not believe that anything I thought or did or prayed satisfied God," Luther wrote. "I did not love, nay, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners."¹

At other times, grief manifested itself as depression. He would experience dark episodes that, in his words, felt "so much like hell that no tongue could adequately express them, no pen could describe them, and one who had not himself experienced them could not believe them... so great were they that, if they had been sustained or had lasted for half an hour, even for one tenth of an hour, he would have perished completely and all of his bones would have been reduced to ashes."²

Most of us have not experienced this kind of guilt, but then again few of us are as serious about our faith as Martin Luther was about his. But all of us know guilt. It is part of what it means to be human, and certainly a part of what it means to be a Christian. We cannot deny our sin and brokenness. In the eyes of a righteous God, we are objectively guilty of breaking God's law, failing to love God with all we have to give, failing to love others as ourselves. All of us know the sadness and sting of that little voice that whispers to our spirit: "You should have done better... you are not good enough, smart enough, worthy enough..."

This is what Paul is talking about in these central, critical verses in his letter to the Romans. Paul is talking about the reality of sin and guilt. And when it comes to sin and guilt, what we need, what we crave, is to be "justified." In Paul's world, the Greek word means a number of things. To be justified is to be acquitted... to be vindicated... to be made free... to be made clean... to be declared righteous.

And Paul is very clear about how we achieve this much-needed absolution and cleansing. We are justified by faith alone. We are justified by grace alone. "For it is by grace you have been

¹ Lex Loizides, "Luther wrestles with God - Through Anger, Guilt, Revelation and Forgiveness." Church History Review, www.lexloiz.wordpress.com. Posted December 2, 2008.

² www.trinitylutheranms.org/MartinLuther/Anfechtungen.html, quoting Luther's Works 31:129.



saved, through faith," Paul writes. "This is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God not by works, so that no one can boast."³ Just so you know, these are foundational principles in our Christian tradition – the idea that salvation – the experience of being made free, made clean, declared right with God – comes not by anything that we do or say, but simply because God loves us and claims us by grace alone.

This has always been a radical notion, but I think it is even harder for us to understand and accept. And by us I mean Americans, in the economy and society that we have today. Because we tend to boil almost everything down to some kind of transaction. If I pay this, I get this. If I do this work, I am rewarded with this benefit.

There's an old story that was once told in the pulpit of my childhood church. It was about a little boy named Bradley.⁴ One morning Bradley came down to breakfast and put a neatly folded piece of paper at his mother's place at the table.

"What is this?" she asked. Not waiting for an answer, she opened it up and read these words, spelled out neatly in crayon:

"Mother owes Bradley: for running errands, 25 cents; for being good, 10 cents; for taking music lessons, 15 cents; for extras, 5 cents. Total, 55 cents." Obviously, it was a bill for services rendered.

Let me pause here for a moment to say that this story was told in the early 1950's. You can translate what the bill would be today.

Anyway, the note stung a little, but Bradley's mother stayed calm and said very little. And when Bradley came to the table for lunch he was delighted to find next to his plate a little pile of coins, neatly totaling exactly 55 cents. He also found another neatly folded piece of paper, neatly written in ink. Opening it, he read, in his mother's handwriting, these words:

"Bradley owes mother, for being good, zero cents; for nursing him through his long illness with scarlet fever, zero cents; for all his meals and his beautiful room, zero cents. Total, zero cents."

Bradley was young, but he was old enough to understand what his mother was saying. A single tear rolled down his cheek. He handed the coins back to his mother and put his arms around her neck. "Don't worry about the list, Mama. Let me love you and do things for nothing."

That is what grace means in the kingdom of God. Grace is not a reward for good behavior. Grace is not a transaction between us and God. But that's what we make of it all the time. The author Diana Butler Bass wrote about this tendency extensively in her book, *Grateful*. She says we often reduce grace into something akin to a holiday gift exchange, you know the ones where everyone brings a \$5 or \$10 gift. "Participation is required," she writes. "Everybody must bring a gift to swap for another. The gifts are obligatory. People generally do not express deep gratitude for these presents. Indeed, the gift cards, coffee mugs, and boxes of candy are usually forgettable – sometimes annoying or even insulting. But if someone gives you a gift, you have to give one back. That is the way it works."⁵

Regrettably, this way of understanding the world is much, much bigger than a holiday ritual. It seems to be everywhere. Almost everything we experience is transactional. There is a benefactor and a recipient. The benefactor gives a gift, and the recipient is expected to reciprocate in some way -- with loyalty or a service or taxes or whatever.⁶

But grace doesn't work that way. At least, God's grace doesn't work that way. The gifts that God gives to us -- including the gift of forgiveness and health -- cannot be earned or purchased. In fact, if

³ Ephesians 2:8-9.

⁴ All elements of this story come from the sermon "The God of all Grace" by Rev. John A. Redhead. Printed in *Getting to Know God* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1954), p121.

⁵ Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018), p. 9.

⁶ *Id.* at 9-10.

a gift must be earned or purchased, then it isn't a gift at all. God's gifts are given freely, without demand, without expectation of payback or quid pro quo. Grace is something that breaks in out of nowhere.

Which is exactly what happened to Martin Luther. And it happened as he was reading the same words from Romans we read this morning. As he read this text, a new light burst into his darkness, shattered his grief, and reoriented his entire life. He finally understood that he could not claim salvation with good deeds or hard work. He finally understood what it meant to be justified by faith, that it was grace all along. Grace and grace alone. "All at once," Luther wrote, "I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates."⁷

Centuries later, in one of the greatest sermons of the 20th Century, the theologian Paul Tillich talked about a similar epiphany. In that moment when grace finds us, Tillich said, *"a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is though a voice were saying: 'You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. **Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!**'"*

"If that happens to us," Tillich continued, *"we experience grace...we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. And nothing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presupposition... nothing but acceptance."*⁸

This is how grace works. The question is, can we accept that? Can we break away from the need to see everything in transactional terms? Can we simply accept that we are accepted, and receive God's grace as a gift without strings?

I for one see it as a very good thing that God is not sitting up in heaven, with arms crossed, pondering whether it is worthwhile to accept us, or to love us... that God is not asking, "Well, what's in it for me if I welcome you into my sheepfold?" Paul uses the verb "to justify." Do we really want to be in the position of having to justify ourselves to God, to work our way into God's good graces, or to somehow prove our worth to God? Isn't it much better to simply accept the amazing gift that is being offered to us with no conditions or strings attached?

I will tell you, the moment we understand the simple power of this gift, that is the moment when grace truly breaks in – just as it did for Paul... just as it did for Martin Luther... just as it has for countless millions who have found a way to accept that we are accepted by the God of heaven and earth. We spend so much of our time trying to earn our acceptance – acceptance by God, acceptance by others, even acceptance of ourselves. All the while God's arms are open, ready to embrace us, ready to say, "Don't worry about the list. Let me love you and do amazing things for you for nothing." **Amen.**

⁷ Martin Luther, translated in "Martin Luther: The Tower Experience, 1519," <http://legacy.fordham.edu>.

⁸ Paul Tillich, "You Are Accepted." *The Shaking of the Foundations*. New York: Scribner's (1948), p. 162.