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Romans 11:6, NRSV.

⁶ But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

Why you are here hearing this today.

A major Christian belief, perhaps the most significant one, especially among Protestants, is that we obtain salvation, that we enter the Kingdom of God, that we make ourselves right with God, simply by believing, by having faith. It's not the case that this was invented by people after the life of Jesus, that it is somehow a forced or twisted interpretation of the New Testament. But there has been for many hundreds of years and still is today an ongoing debate about the validity and even the logic of this belief. Let me start with the words of Jesus, in the Gospel of John, just to nail down the fact that this doctrine started with Jesus himself. In the 3rd chapter of John, there is a man named Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a religious leader of the Jewish faith who visits Jesus at night, apparently to avoid being seen by his peers. He calls Jesus Rabbi, meaning "teacher", and asks Jesus what it means to be born again. This is part of what Jesus says to Nicodemus:

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

Jesus makes it clear that he didn't come to Earth to punish, but rather to offer love.

He calls himself the light and not darkness. He says that all we have to do is believe in him to be saved. We are “*saved through him*”.

But in the Gospel of Matthew, at a point where Jesus is finishing up his Sermon on the Mount, he has shifted his focus from moral instructions to warning the crowd listening to him about spiritual deception. He is telling them the difference between people who follow him and people who do not live by his ways:

¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will know them by their fruits.

Jesus is making it clear that what we do, the output of our lives, directly indicates, not just suggests, what is in our hearts. A person of faith is a good tree. Jesus says that as good trees, we must produce good fruit - unless in truth we are bad trees.

Jesus makes a number of other statements about good acts, about what we do in life, declaring that we must be a positive force in the world. He tells us that our motives must be pure when we do good works. In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus also says this:

6 “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

2 “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others.

Not only must we be producing good fruits in this life we must make sure we’re not doing it for recognition by other people – because that is just another form of being selfish, of producing bad fruit.

Several times I have had people who are near the end of their lives tell me that they don’t believe that they have done what they should have done in their lives, that they should have spent more of their time, their money, their mental energy making the world a better place. It’s a particularly big issue these days, given the conflict in our nation and in the world. The media is very polarizing. No matter what political side a publication, newscast, or social media stream is on, they manipulate people’s emotions to ensure that their audience will remain loyal. That means turning modest problems into catastrophes. I find that people are internalizing issues from the media, making them feel anxious, even guilty. One man I spoke to felt guilty not because he had been particularly selfish in life, not because he had gotten extremely wealthy and hadn’t been generous. He had been a professional, earned a good living, worked long hours. But he spent time with his family. I met his two adult children – and they deeply loved him. His daughter,

who was in her twenties, told me that her father and mother had lived below their means, taught them that living for “stuff” would leave them cold in life, and that their parents owned a small rental house, but hadn’t asked for any rent in six months because the woman living there with her two young children had lost her job. He was kind and respectful. He was, in fact, the kind person that is likely to feel guilty about what they have not done in life – someone who does care and has struggled to lead a balanced life. Let’s call him Tony. He referred to himself as “unlucky” medically, that he had suffered a long series of medical calamities over his life. It was true: he had a rather varied and significant medical history. The issue was that after just having had a very major surgery to deal with a life-threatening problem, and now experiencing complications, he sensed that he wasn’t going to make it this time. But the medical people in the hospital were optimistic, and their only reservations had to do with his multiple comorbidities.

There is a controversy over the Book of Romans. The book has very deeply impacted Christian doctrine and began to gain heavy influence at the start of the Protestant reformation. The issue is that many people are uncomfortable with Paul’s preoccupation with salvation by faith alone. And truthfully, many have used this letter to argue that we don’t have to worry about what we do. If we have faith, we’ve got it made. The hell with everything else. We talked about this last week.

What we need to keep in mind is that Paul was writing mostly to Jewish Christians in Rome, a church that he had not had a chance to influence. There were many people there arguing that to be a true follower of Christ, to accept Jesus as your Messiah, you have to essentially become a Jew and follow all or significant parts of Mosaic Jewish law, like the food rules, being circumcised, and honoring all of the Jewish festivals, like Passover. Paul was arguing that all you need is faith, rather than having to follow Mosaic law. He was not saying that all you need is faith, and you don't have to follow the laws of God that require us to live out our faith and be generous, kind, and forgiving.

Consider this passage from Romans, at the beginning of Chapter 11. The context is this. Paul is arguing that God has not abandoned the Jewish people, that Jesus is the Messiah of all people. He uses an Old Testament concept, called a "remnant". Let's start with that concept. An instance of it appears in Isaiah, Chapter 10:

²⁰ On that day the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean on the one who struck them, but will lean on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. ²¹ A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. ²² For though your people Israel were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will return. Destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness.

Isaiah is making the point that the Israelites have been and will be punished by God when they break their covenant with him. In this case, Israel has a history of trying

to make deals with their oppressors, like Assyria, but in the future, a “remnant” will turn entirely to God, put their trust in God, and live only by God’s ways. Here is the passage from Chapter 11 of Romans:

11 I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ² God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? ³ “Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars; I alone am left, and they are seeking my life.” ⁴ But what is the divine reply to him? “I have kept for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” ⁵ So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. ⁶ But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

Paul uses a notion that Jewish followers of Christ in Rome will be familiar with, a “remnant”. He is assuring Jewish Christians that God hasn’t, with the introduction of the New Covenant, abandoned the Jews and decided that only Gentiles will be saved. It is indeed the case that Gentiles do not have to become Jews, but Jews are no less valued. There will indeed be a remnant that will accept their Messiah, and they will be embraced by God equally with Gentile Christians. In this passage, Paul is reminding them of another “remnant” reference in the Bible. The prophet Elijah has just won a dramatic victory against pagan followers of Baal, the major god of ancient pagans. Now, he is under threat from those pagans. He is forced to flee into the wilderness, the desert. Elijah is isolated and prays to God, saying that so many of his people have abandoned their covenant and now worship Baal. God

assures Elijah that a remnant of 7,000 people will stay true to God. Paul is saying that once again, as the history of the Chosen People has indicated, there is always a remnant that listens to God. This time, the remnant are following Christ. For us, the critical verse is this:

So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. ⁶ But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

Grace is, by definition, unearned. Paul is saying that this remnant is now free from having to worry about Mosaic law and the restrictions it put on their lives. He is not saying that this law is wrong or bad. In fact, historically, the Old Testament laws kept the people united and maintained their focus on God in their daily lives: it was a good thing. But - Paul wants Jewish Christians to understand that under the New Covenant, God gives his grace to everyone, and all he wants in return is sincere faith.

Tony had one overriding concern. He had always been optimistic in the past when he was in the hospital – and he had been hospitalized many times. He was one of those people who seemed to have a history of numerous, serious, unrelated medical problems. He felt his energy leaving him. He asked me if it was wrong for him to let himself go, to pass away this time, when his family would deeply miss him and he hadn't done all he could in his life to help other people. I asked him if

he had any “spiritual beliefs”, if he practiced any religion. He told me that he was raised a Christian, but that he wasn’t so sure he truly “believed”, that he had “faith”. I told him that having doubts is natural, that for most people, faith isn’t like flipping a light switch. It’s a process, a journey, with our faith growing stronger over time, and that most of us never reach a point of perfect faith.

In the Book of Romans, Paul uses Abraham, the ancient father of the Chosen People, as an example of true faith. This story is from Genesis and long predates the Israelites entering Canaan and distributing its land to the twelve tribes. Abraham left his homeland, a place called Ur, under the instruction of God, to go to Canaan. God promises Abraham that there will be a great nation of his people there. He and his wife have difficulty having children. After many years, his wife Sarah has a son, Isaac. Isaac becomes the father of Jacob. Jacob becomes the father of twelve sons, each one the father of a Tribe of Israel. So, God took his time but kept his promise to Abraham to use him to build a nation – as a result of Abraham’s faith. Here is Romans 4:19-21, where Paul speaks of Abraham:

¹⁹ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. ²⁰ No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹ being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

The promise that God made was to create a nation in Israel, a nation that would be founded by Abraham's family. We of course have doubts about the existence of Abraham; he may have been mythical, or he could be a truly historical figure. We cannot be certain of the genealogy of Abraham's descendants. But Paul, who is writing largely to Jewish Christians in Rome, is working to convince them that all that matters now is faith and all that flows from having faith. He gives his readers a relatable example of what it means to have faith. He says that we must give our *"glory to God"* and be *"fully convinced"* that God will indeed do what he promises.

So, I asked Tony if he gave his glory to God, that is if he saw God as more deserving of praise than himself. Did he see the power and the work of God as far more important than his work? And second, did he believe that God keeps his promises? He said yes to both. I told him that there is a letter in the New Testament called Romans. He said he knew it existed but knew nothing about it. I gave him a little rundown on why Paul wrote it, and the nature of his audience, and the purpose of the letter. Then I told him that this letter had hugely impacted various Christian theologians over history, and in fact Augustine, the great Roman theologian of the 400's was transformed after reading the letter to the Romans. Augustine then said this in a sermon:

But God made you without you. You didn't, after all, give any consent to God making you. How were you to consent, if you didn't yet exist? So while he made you without you, he doesn't justify you without you. So he made you without your knowing it, he justifies you with your willing consent to it.

The language is a little twisted, as it is very ancient. But it says that all God is looking for is our permission to save us.

I told Tony that Martin Luther, who began the Protestant movement in the 1500's, was also inspired and transformed by Romans. He found that Romans released him from guilt, from feeling that he had to work desperately hard just to earn God's love. I told Tony that I am a Methodist reverend and that the founder of the Methodist movement was an Anglican priest who also started the Methodist denomination, but by accident. And John Wesley, that priest who used the word "Methodism" to mean that we should be deliberate and thoughtful in our faith, wrote that he was "*strangely warmed*" by listening to a reading of Luther's introduction to Romans, and that it changed his life.

I read this very famous passage from Chapter 1 of Romans to Tony:

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."

When Paul says that he is not ashamed of the Gospel, he means that he is not worried about God or Christ letting him down, about God not doing what he

promises. This says that all people can be made right with God simply by having faith, by giving their “*glory to God*” and being “*fully convinced*” that God will never abandon us.

Tony was discharged from the hospital, but I learned that later, he had a crisis and passed away very quickly. I don’t know what his last conscious thoughts might have been, and I never try to guess the depth of anyone’s faith. I am always optimistic about the future, and I am respectful of people’s beliefs. All I can say is that I do hope that all of us can leave here today knowing two things. First, since this is a Methodist Church, you are hearing this today very literally because of Romans, because of its impact on Protestantism and specifically because of its impact on John Wesley. And second, I hope you are here because you do give your glory to God and you are fully convinced that God keeps his promises.