

Lent 2—B
Romans 5:1-11
The Joys of Justification

In Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, there is a grave of a certain Civil War soldier. The stone bears the dates of his birth and death, plus the words: “Abraham Lincoln’s Substitute.” In the woe and anguish of the war, realizing that thousands were falling on the field of battle, President Lincoln chose to honor one particular soldier as his substitute—to emphasize that those who perished in battle were dying that others might live. Jesus Christ died as a real substitute, paying for the sins of the world, so that because of his shed blood every person on earth can be justified, declared just, forgiven. This morning we are going to focus on the great joys that we have in justification. Justification is a big, church word that means “declared not guilty.” This is our status through Christ. May the Holy Spirit guide us this morning to see the real joys that are ours in justification.

I. The joy of access to God’s grace

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God” (1-2). “Access” means entrance. By faith we have entrance into this grace in which we stand. Think of a room. By faith we walk into that room, and the name of the room is what? Grace. The ceiling, walls, floor, all grace. We live inside God’s grace, his love, his forgiveness. We’re always forgiven. We must not think of forgiveness as something that takes place in our life every once in awhile, that we pile up sins for a time and then we get forgiven. We’re forgiven all the time.

I’ve heard someone say: “Pastor, I hope I don’t die while I’m sinning.” This person didn’t know what sin was. Of course, we are all going to die while we’re sinning. All of us are far short of what we ought to be all the time (Romans 3:23). The Law tells us how we are to be and not to be, and what we ought to do and not to do. Not being what we ought to be is also a sin. The law demands perfection (Leviticus 19:2). If we are not perfect, we are living in sin. But having access to God’s grace means that even if we are sinning all the time (which we are), we are forgiven all the time.

Another person asked, “What if I die without thinking of Jesus at that moment?” Access to God’s grace means we are living inside the forgiveness of sins. If we die when we are not thinking about Jesus, such as in our sleep, we will still die as a believer.

Sometimes we might think to ourselves, “I hope that I have a chance to repent before I die.” That’s not right. The whole life of a believer ought to be one of repentance (Martin Luther, 95 Theses, 1517). That doesn’t mean to feel bad all the time either. See, believing doesn’t mean that we feel good all the time as bouncy optimists with perpetual smiles, and repenting doesn’t mean that we feel bad all the time with our heads hung low. Repenting just means knowing that we’re a sinner who deserves to go to hell. Being scared to die without Jesus—that’s sorrow over sins. And faith is knowing that Jesus forgives us all the time; every minute of the day we are forgiven. When we die without having a chance to repent consciously, we still die as a person who knows that we are a sinner and that Jesus died for. How many times during the day do we think of the fact that 2+2=4? Did we know that last night when we were

sound asleep? We sure did. Did we know it this morning? Certainly. And so we know all the time that Jesus is our Savior, whatever happens to us.

Living in Christ's forgiveness, we "*rejoice in hope of the glory of God*" (2). Here the "*glory of God*" is the praise that God gives us. Someday when we stand before God, what's he going to say? "*Well done, good and faithful servant*" (Matthew 25:21). We will say, "But when did I ever do anything good?" He will say, "That's alright, Jesus did it all for you. Well done, you kept all my commandments." So we look forward to Judgment Day when God will say, "You are not guilty." We "*rejoice in hope*" that that's the way it's going to be. We know it's true now, by faith. Then we'll hear it with our own ears from the mouth of God himself. Now we hear it from human preachers, but then Jesus himself will say it. "*Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world*" (Matthew 25:34). We can always draw on the joy of knowing we stand in God's grace. Standing in God's grace, we also have a perfect life.

II. The joy of a perfect life

It is generally agreed by all that the Lord Jesus Christ was one of the best men who ever lived. Even the unbelieving world has a high regard for him as a man. They speak of his willingness to stand up for what is right. They find it wonderful that he was willing to pray even for those who crucified him. The heathen are willing to admit that his sermon on the mount is one of the greatest sermons ever preached. They say that if only people would learn to live according to these teachings of Jesus, this old world would overnight become a much better place, and most of our troubles would be solved. The example of Jesus is often held up before people, even by unbelievers, to show them how they should live.

It is also true, that in the church, we should hold up the example of the Lord Jesus and call upon his Christians to follow him. St. Peter says that the Savior has left us an example that we should follow his steps. But it is also true that the perfect life that he led must mean much more to us than this. If the Lord Jesus is looked upon only as a model after whom we should pattern our life, then we have not really understood the meaning and the significance of his life. His perfect holiness and righteousness, his complete obedience to the law of God, is really part of his saving work. We are reminded of this by St. Paul's words that we are made righteous by his obedience: "*For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!*" (10)

When we think of what the Lord Jesus did to redeem us, we often think only of the cross of Calvary—and we say that he suffered and died for our sins. This is certainly a great and very important part of the work that he did to save us. But if this were the only thing that was necessary to redeem us and to straighten out things between us and God, it would not have been necessary for the Lord Jesus to live in this world in poverty and lowliness for more than thirty years. He might have come into this world just a few days before Good Friday, as a grown man, in order to be crucified and then gone back to heaven. Instead, he was born as a little baby and lived as an ordinary child and young man in Nazareth for thirty years before he even began to preach.

We sometimes forget that suffering and dying is only a part of the debt that we owe to God. It is really only the penalty of the interest on the original debt. God said in his Word that if people wanted to be saved, then they had to keep the commandments. For example, one day a

young man asked the Lord Jesus what he should do to be saved, and the Lord told him, “*If you want to enter life, obey the commandments*” (Matthew 19:17). You remember that when a certain lawyer stood up to tempt Jesus, he asked him: “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” The Savior said, “*What is written in the Law? How do you read it?*” When the lawyer answered, “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind,*” Jesus told him, “*Do this and you will live*” (Luke 10:25-28). St. Paul says in the letter to the Romans that the doers of the law shall be justified and that those who do the things commanded in the law shall live.

There are many people who think that these things do not count anymore since Jesus died for us. But God does not change, and when he says that men must keep the law in order to be saved, this is one of God’s unchangeable rules, and it will stand forever. Jesus himself told the Jewish leaders, “*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them*” (Matthew 5:17). So the law must still be kept by people if they want to get to heaven.

But this is something we can never do, no matter how hard we try. If there is anything that is taught clearly about people in the Holy Bible, it is certainly this: it is impossible for people ever to do what they have to do if they are to be saved. St. Paul says, “*The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law nor can it do so*” (Romans 8:7). And when the Bible tells us that all people are sinners, it means very simply that they have not kept the law.

Because the law has to be kept if we are to be saved, therefore, Jesus came into the world, not only to suffer and to die for us, but also to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. The letter to the Galatians says, “*When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons*” (Galatians 4:4-5). He came to fulfill the law in our place, and just as he is our substitute on the cross and in his death—so that by his suffering and death he pays for our sins—so he is our substitute also in his holy life. When he kept the law, he kept it for us. He did what we were supposed to do if we were to be saved.

So he was a little child in order to do the things that God tells children to do. He was anxious to learn more of the word of God, and so we find him when he is twelve years old, sitting in the temple, listening to his teachers and asking them questions. And even though he was the Son of God, and knew that he was the Son of God, he went home with Mary and Joseph, and the Bible goes on to say that he was obedient to them, that is, he did what Mary and Joseph told him to do. When he did these things, he was making up for all the times when we did not do our lessons in school the way we were supposed to do them, and for all the times when we did not obey our parents the way we were supposed to obey them.

The Old Testament ceremonial law said that Jewish boys were to be circumcised, and so he was circumcised when he was eight days old. It said that the first-born son was to be presented to God in the temple, and so Jesus was presented to the Lord when he was forty days old. The law said that we should feed our neighbor when he is hungry, and so Jesus fed the 5000 men with five loaves and two fish. The law said that we should help our neighbor when he is in trouble, and so Jesus went about doing good, as the Bible says, healing the sick, comforting the sorrowing, making the lame walk and the blind see, so that the people said, “*He has done everything well*” (Mark 7:37).

The Bible tells us many times that he never did a single sin. Even when he had no food for forty days, he would not eat when the devil tempted him, even though Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden when they had no reason to be hungry. And in one

sense, we can say that he was fulfilling the law even when he died. The law said that we had to die for our sins, and so he did here, too, what the law said we had to do. As St. Paul says, "*He became obedient to death*" (Philippians 2:8).

And by his obedience we have been reconciled, as our lesson says. When he kept the law for us, in our place, he made us righteous and not guilty in the sight of God. If a man's secretary writes a letter for him, he can say that he wrote the letter. And when Jesus kept the law for us, we can say, by the grace of God, that we kept the law. Through him and in him we did everything we were supposed to do, and now, for Jesus' sake, God treats us as though we had never done anything wrong, and he promises that, for Jesus' sake, he will say that we are not guilty when we stand before him on the day of judgment.

The more we study these things, the more we realize how much we owe to the Lord Jesus. But someone may say, "Well, if this is true and Jesus kept the whole law for us, then we don't have to keep it anymore. We can go ahead and sin and still go to heaven." But a Christian, who loves the Lord Jesus, will not talk that way. The unbelieving world will never understand this, but really a Christian will often have a greater desire to keep the law just because he does not have to keep it.

A few years ago I was picking up sticks, and my son wanted to help. A thought came to me that I am sure has often come to those of you who are parents. It is a strange thing that our children want to help when they are too little to help, but when they get older and you tell them to do something, then they don't want to do it anymore. Even grown people often work much harder at things they don't have to do than they work at the work that they are supposed to do. And that is the way it ought to be in the life of the Christian. Now that the Lord Jesus has kept the law for us, and we don't have to do it any more to be saved, we ought to be so much more anxious to do it and so much more willing to do it, not because we want to save ourselves, but because we love him, and we know that he has redeemed us with his life and death so that we might serve him all the days of our life. God grant that to us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Hymns: 385, 390, 384, 317:2 (377)