

“GROUNDED IN GOD’S LOVE”

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Text: Romans 5:1-8

Who here wants to be perfect? Is there anybody who doesn't want to be perfect? We spend a lot of time and energy trying to achieve perfection, don't we? Women will spend hours in front of a mirror trying to make sure the hair and makeup are perfect, with every blemish covered. Guys will pump iron in the gym day after day after day trying to get that perfectly toned body. Every year, models grace the runways to inform us of exactly the perfect fashion for the season. We spend a great deal of our lives learning, and then trying to perfect, a certain skill or trade so that we can earn a living. So much of what we do demands perfection, doesn't it? "Go big, or go home," we are told.

The pressure to be perfect can be pretty overwhelming, can't it? In all our efforts to attain perfection, we can get pretty stressed out. But carrying the burden of stress is not really a good way to live life. It can cause all sorts of problems for us, and for everyone we know and love. But there is a better way of life. A way that we can, in a sense at least, achieve perfection without all the stress. The free gift of God's love offered to all people through the person and work of Jesus Christ. And Paul's words essentially tell us that if we receive this gift in faith, then we can be perfect in the only way that matters; that is, in the way God sees us. Paul wasn't just kidding when he said the gospel is power, was he?

Where we pick up in Paul's letter to the Romans this morning, Paul has finished describing Jesus' amazing work on the cross, and now he is beginning to unveil just how Christ's work can change a person's life. So what is it? A warm fuzzy feeling? A sigh of relief? A new understanding? Well, those things are part of it, but Paul doesn't mince words here. He goes straight to the heart of the matter. "The result is this: since we have been declared 'in the right' (righteous) on the

basis of faith, we have peace with God.” It’s more than warm fuzzies, or relief, or better understanding. It is the opposite of stress, and distress, and strife. It is peace. We can have peace.

This next section of Paul’s letter, what we know as chapters 5-8, are all about peace and hope. Paul is beginning here to build this picture of the Christian life in which all the promises of God are coming true. And at the center of these promises is the establishment of a loving, welcoming, personal relationship with God himself; a relationship which can give us peace and hope in the midst of all of life’s greatest difficulties.

I was listening to a radio show on a Christian radio station a while back. The hosts were simply talking about the fact that God wants to have a deep, life-giving, personal relationship with every person. Then, this lady calls in. And she says, “I just don’t get it! It seems so ridiculous. If there even is a God, would he actually be concerned with every single one of his human creatures at every single moment. There are millions and millions of people out there, and here God is watching me tie up my shoelace! It’s so absurd!” Perhaps it does seem absurd, but the thing is, it’s the truth. Our problem with this truth is that we imagine God on far too small of a scale. The God revealed to us in the Bible, and especially through Jesus Christ, is so mysterious. Our God is the creator of the world, and rules over all of his creation. Still, at the core of all of God’s action and being is love, and the most natural outpouring of that love is to establish personal, one-on-one relationships with each of us.

And that’s where the hope comes in! In our constant pursuit of perfection, one of the realities is that we become acutely aware of all of our shortcomings. Right? If there is something about us that is not exactly the way we think it should be, we know that. And often times we become obsessed with it. We begin to feel weak, broken, and unworthy. And to that, Paul says, “While we were still weak...Christ died for the ungodly people...while we were still sinners Christ died for us.”

So here’s what that might sound like to each of us, all of us individuals with whom God desires a deep relationship. “While you were still a gossip, Christ died for you. While you were still an addict, Christ died for you. While you were

still selfish, Christ died for you. While you were still a criminal, Christ died for you. While you were still a bully, Christ died for you. While you were still an adulterer, Christ died for you. While you were still ignoring the poor, Christ died for you. While you were still broken, and defiant, and apathetic, Christ died for you." "While we were still weak...while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

God in Christ has done so much for us. Through Jesus Christ, God's love has done everything we could ever need. And God shares that love with us because God really does care about being in a deep, personal, committed relationship with each of us. Indeed, as the woman on the radio show pointed out, it is difficult to imagine that God would care that much about each of us. And so we get all caught up in worry and nervousness. We drive ourselves to all sorts of awful behaviors because we think that's the only way we can ever achieve peace. But what Paul is telling us here, plain as day, is that God has already made peace possible for us through his grace shown to us in Jesus Christ.

The Founder of the Biggest Revival to hit this world in the past 300 years, John Wesley, was a man who was searching for "peace with God." One day it came to him, when he was listening to someone, in a Bible study, reading Martin Luther's Preface to Romans. Wesley wrote: "About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." John Wesley started preaching salvation by grace through faith alone! It was the Great Awakening, or the Methodist Movement. And it spread like wildfire across the continents.

When we come to know and truly believe that God loves us, unconditionally, and wants a relationship with us, no matter what we have done or who we are...when we come to accept ourselves and thus others because of God's acceptance and love for us...this is when new life begins--this is when we have been made right, as Paul says, "through [God's] faithfulness combined with our faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." And peace with God is what all people need and crave. All of us search for peace--peace of mind.

I Googled "peace of mind" just out of curiosity this week. Here are some of the things which came up: "40 ways to create peace of mind through tiny buddha.com." "9 ways to find peace of mind in tough times." "The Peace of Mind Foundation." "Peace of Mind Early Education." "The Ten Commandments for Peace of Mind." "Peace of Mind Dog Rescue Home." And it goes on and on and on.

We are all searching for peace of mind. It's part of the human condition in the midst of our very broken and incomplete lives. We try so hard, every way we know how to attain peace, to have hope in an often depressing world, and what Paul wants us to hear today, very clearly, is that everything we are searching for is right in front of us. I love what theologian N.T. Wright has to say about this: "What Paul says here makes no sense unless Jesus, in his life and death, was the very incarnation, the 'enfleshment' of the living, loving God. After all, it doesn't make sense if I say to you, 'I see you are in a real mess! Now I love you so much that I'm going to send someone else to help you out of it.' If the death of Jesus demonstrates how much God loves us, that can only be because Jesus is the fully human being in whom the living God is fully present."

And if God loves you and God loves me--and everyone else so much that He came down from heaven and died for us, even when we were at our darkest...if God loves us that much...how much can we trust God to bring us peace of mind, and hope even as we suffer in this present life?!

Are you searching for peace this morning? Do you feel as if you can never be good enough, much less good enough for God to love you? Are you trying to win God's approval on your own, but you are continuously falling short? Are you sad? Are you lonely? Do you feel dirty and unloved? Do you know that "God shows his love for you in this: while you were at your darkest--Christ died for you?"

Do you believe this for real? Do you have peace?