

The Righteous Shall Live by Faith  
Grace Chapel, Bear Creek, August 30, 2020

The words of scripture that I'm focusing on are from Romans. I'll be also reading some familiar scriptures from the gospels of John and Matthew, as well as a verse from the epistle of James, and a bit from II Corinthians. A few verses from Luke, too. My purpose is to address how to live our faith in this time of pandemic. There are two basic issues. The first is, how to maintain faith that there is a God, a just and caring God, in the midst of terrible things happening, things like this worldwide virus epidemic. The second issue, once we get past the first one, is what to do about it. How do we live out our lives believing in a just God, through these difficult times. I read now from Paul's letter to the Romans.

**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, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." (RSV)**

<sup>16</sup> For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. <sup>17</sup> For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith. (KJV)

Paul is quoting the prophet Habakkuk. This same quote also appears in Galatians 3:11 as well as Hebrews 10:38. Paul is trying to make the point that it is faith, not works of the Law, that saves us. By "Greek" Paul means the non-Jews, the gentiles. That would be us.

As we moderns come to this state of things, living in the midst of a pandemic that has claimed up towards 200,000 lives in this country alone, what are we to make of this? Sure, Paul, you had your vision on the road to Damascus. Of course you can have faith. But what of the rest of us? We are sitting here hunkered down, staying home, avoiding people, and trying to hold onto our lives through a plague of Biblical proportions. How do we have faith in this just God, the one Jesus represents to us, in the midst of this awful calamity? Or any of the other awful calamities – tidal waves, earthquakes, wars, illness in general, and the death of loved ones. If it was just the evil who perished, the Hitlers and Stalins and the like, maybe we could believe in God, but good people perish too. This is the fundamental argument that the atheist brings against faith.

We know what a virus is, we know how it spreads. They argue that there is no need to see God present or absent, so if God exists and is just, he is powerless. Or there just isn't a god. And, likewise, with respect to those other bad things that happen that a good God would prevent.

To that complaint, we people of faith have trouble giving a good answer. It's the "Why do bad things happen to good people?" question. We are in effect asking God why he created the Universe the way he did, where such things can happen. This is the question Job asked. If you have not, sometime, read God's answer to Job. As I read it, God tells Job that he simply doesn't have the perspective, the understanding, to know and comprehend the ways of God. And, we don't either. What would be lost in order to have a perfect Universe? Free will? Time? Love? We human beings do not understand the fabric of the Universe, much less the answers to such questions. Do we really believe we could build a better universe than the one we have?

Let me offer a parallel. We humans are said to be created in the image of God. I take that as including creativity – we like to make things, things that are new, things that are useful, things that are good. Sometimes we create things that are bad, too. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the digital computer was invented. It was good. It was useful for accounting, controlling machines, and eventually even for writing, communication, and entertainment. Then, someone created computer viruses! And set them loose into the world of computers. Like that snake in the garden of Eden. Now, we are all afflicted with robot calls, fraudulent inducements to divulge our bank account numbers, pop-up advertisements, and all manner of parasitic things that require that we live suspicious of each and every call or unsolicited message we receive. Should we blame the people who invented computers for the viruses? No! But the "Garden of Eden" period of computer use came to an end when viruses, always possible but not yet created, came into existence.

Viruses, the biological ones, exist as a part of the Creation as we now know it. The nature and density of people in civilization makes spread easier. But humans have done much to limit the damage, too. Good works in caring for others make a difference. Even small things, like wearing a face mask, can reduce the spread of viruses such as the one we are currently fighting. But most of all, we can expect mercy from God, and be part of that mercy to others.

So, for the moment, let's say that yes, we can have faith in a merciful, caring God, the God Jesus reveals, despite the bad things that happen in the world. God didn't explain the way the creation works. He still hasn't. And scientists still have not figured it all out for themselves, either. I think they are still a long way from doing so. What God did was, in the person of Jesus, come and live among us as a man, died an underserved and horrible death, as a demonstration of his love for us. And not just that; Jesus rose again, was seen and witnessed, as an assurance to us of our place with God in eternity. We, and Paul, use the word "faith" for believing this. As Christians, that's what we believe. At least in some churches, we formally say so as the Apostles Creed, or the Nicene Creed, a statement of those beliefs.

So, let's say that, yes, we have faith. What does that mean for the way we live our lives, especially now, in the midst of this pandemic? Does our faith really save us? Listen to these words of the epistle of James:

**James 2:17 "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." (RSV)**

Welcome to the "faith versus works" debate! At least superficially, it looks like Paul is arguing that it is faith that saves us, not works. While James seems to be saying the opposite. But, if we look at what Paul actually did during his life, there were works in abundance! In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul has reason to list some of what he endured in his life in ministry up to that time. Compared to the others, he claims, "11: 23 ... **far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. 24 Five times I have received from the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I have been beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; for a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirsty, often without food, in cold and exposure.**" I'll add that, at the time, he still had at least one more shipwreck, and a snake bite, yet to come. That's not faith without works! Paul would say it is works because of faith.

In John's gospel, in Jesus's farewell discourse to his disciples, he says, (Hymnbook #57)

**John 14:1 “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ... 6 Jesus said to him [Thomas], “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me. 7 If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him.” (RSV)**

Now, if you think that settles the faith versus works issue, consider also these words of Jesus found in the Gospel of Matthew. The parable of the Judgment of the Nations are the last words of Jesus’s public teaching. They are important. (In Hymnbook as #308) Jesus describes that, as the king turns to those on his right hand, he says:

**34b ‘Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ 37 Then the righteous will answer him, 39 “‘Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? 38 And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? 39 And when did we see thee sick or in prison, and visit thee?’ 40 And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I say to you, just as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’”**

Jesus here says nothing about beliefs. He mentions several things, works, that the righteous did. Doing these works seems to have been the salvation for the righteous. So, does this contradict what Paul says? What we read from John?

I don’t believe it does. Notice the surprise that the righteous ones express. “When did we see you hungry, or thirsty, a stranger, naked or sick?” The righteous have been doing these things for a reason other than checking things off a list. It was the way they lived. The principle of caring for the poor and suffering was already a very important principle in Judaism. Jesus expanded its application. If you want a checklist, it’s a short list. The scribe asked Jesus, in Luke’s gospel, Luke 10:25 ...“Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said unto him, “What is written in the law? How do you read?” 27 And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” 28 And he said to him, “You have answered right; do this, and you will live.”

The list Jesus gives was too short for the scribe: Love God; love your neighbor. He wanted details, things he could check off, and by so doing have assurance of life. So he then asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus answered with the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Just so, the righteous in the parable of the Judgment have shown God’s love to those who were hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked or sick. They have been neighbors as Jesus meant it. And in doing so, they touched Jesus, and came to life through him, unknowing. Why would they do that? A life motivated by faith in a just God. Acting according to a view of life that values the other. This was in marked contrast to the pagan view that the gods cared little about humanity, and had to be bribed to do their duty of bringing rain and seasons to pass.

Even so, James says, “I by my works will show you my faith.” James does not say that he does not have faith, only works. He really is saying that faith ought to be seen reflected in the works of the faithful. So, really, there isn’t inconsistency on the practical level. Christians were and are saved through faith, a faith that can be seen in their lives, as they do what they can do. As my mother put it, “Works are an outward sign of our faith.”

This is the attitude that early Christians brought to the gentile, pagan world: God loves us, and we are to love one another. That’s what we will and must do, if we love God. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “No man comes to the Father except through me.” Matthew tells us of all the ways we can meet and show love for Jesus in our actions, without even realizing it. Christians of the early church set out to live this way.

There was a severe epidemic in the Roman world during the time of emperor Marcus Aurelius, about 165 A.D. About a quarter to a third of the population died. At the time Christians were a small minority in a pagan world. The pagans reacted to the plague, possibly the first occurrence of smallpox in the Roman world, the way people had throughout previous history. As soon as someone was seen to have symptoms, they were cast out into the street to die. The Romans did not value mercy. Having mercy on the poor and suffering was seen as weakness. There was no benefit to going to the temples; the priests and the rest of the elite had fled to the countryside where they expected to be safer. But Christians answered to a different ethic. Jesus taught mercy and sacrifice for others. I’d like for you to hear the words of Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, during that time. He is writing from a perspective of about two millenia ago.

“How suitable, how necessary it is that this plague and pestilence, which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the justice of each and every one and examines the mind of the human race; whether the well care for the sick, whether relatives dutifully love their kinsman as they should, whether masters show compassion for their ailing slaves, whether physicians do not desert the afflicted .... Although this mortality has contributed nothing else, it has especially accomplished this for Christians and servants of God, that we have begun gladly to seek martyrdom while we are learning not to fear death. These are trying exercises for us, not deaths; they give to mind the glory of fortitude; by contempt of death they prepare for the crown.... Our brethren who have been freed from this earth by the summons of the Lord should not be mourned, since we know that they are not lost but sent before, that in departing they lead the way; that as travelers, as voyagers are wont to be, they should be longe[d] for, not lamented... and that no occasion should be given to pagans to censure us deservedly and justly, on the ground that we grieve for those who we say are living.” (Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, p.116)

Christians cared for each other, and for many of their pagan neighbors as well. Just the kindness of providing food and water, and some elementary nursing, made a big difference, reducing mortality to perhaps about a third of what it might be for those completely abandoned. This was noticed. Christians became known for what they did, and the faith that inspired those acts of mercy. Similar things happened during another plague a century later. Is it any wonder that the pagans found in Christianity a religion worth joining? Jesus promised life. That was demonstrated in the way Christians lived, and sometimes gave their lives, for others. (adapted from Stark, p. 117)

Good works in caring for others makes a difference. Even small things like wearing a face mask. But most of all, we can expect mercy from God, and be part of that mercy to others. Just as the early second century Christians showed their faith in caring for others, so can we. Those of us not on the “front lines” of this fight can do our part in small ways, and pray for those who are victims, or at risk as they care for others. We can trust the Holy Spirit to lead us to know what to do.

I’d like to point out this quality of mercy as being an important distinction between Christianity and today’s popular culture which also values “good works.” Today the popular culture of the media and celebrities rightly points to values of equity and justice, which are indeed important. But, woe to anyone who may make a mistake, or utters a foolish word, or takes an unpopular position! Modern “call-out” culture has no mercy. Transgressors are to be hounded, banished, and repudiated forever by right-thinking members of our current secular religion.

Making a mistake that may allow someone else to be infected is bad. But it is possibly inadvertent, a lapse of attention, or simply from foolishness. Indeed, this virus is so insidious, that we may not even make a recognizable mistake, and still, without intending to, infect someone else unknowingly. I remember doing something somewhat similar when computer viruses were starting to appear. I sent a floppy disk with some software on it to a correspondent, and infected his computer! I was embarrassed. I thought I had been safe. It turned out that a floppy disk I had purchased from the bookstore was already pre-infected! No great damage was done, but I still felt very bad about it. How much worse if I caused someone to be infected with this deadly human virus?

Anyone who comes down with the virus is probably wondering, “Who gave me this? And, “Who might I have infected?” There is guilt enough for any of us without shouldering this. We need to live lives that not only show caring for the ill and downtrodden, but also for those who err. And, trust God’s mercy and forgiveness for ourselves. We trust in God, through Jesus Christ, to take away our sins. That’s Good News, the Gospel, that lets us live out our faith with confidence. A forgiveness that popular culture does not offer.

I hope I have helped you find reasons for faith in a just God, a God who loves and cares for us, if you have had doubts in the midst of these troubled times. And given faith in such a God, a God whose nature is revealed in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, what must we do? Live that faith! We are to seek to be like Jesus, loving God and neighbor. But always remember that Jesus shows us a merciful God, one who forgives our sins and does not remember our iniquities.

So, I ask of us all, as we go out and continue to be human and caring in this dangerous time, remember to have mercy. People will make mistakes, in this and in other things. We need to be ready to forgive, and to ask forgiveness. We all live under God’s grace.

Amen.