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 Romans 3:21-31
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Are there any George Michael fans in the congregation this morning?

*Oh but I
 Need some time off from that emotion
 Time to pick my heart up off the floor
 Oh when that love comes down
 Without devotion
 Well it takes a strong man baby
 But I'm showing you the door*

*'Cause I gotta have faith
 I gotta have faith
 'Cause I gotta have faith, faith
 'Cause I gotta have faith, faith, faith*

I don't know if you remember it or not but that song actually starts off with notes from the organ.

So there's supposed to be a link between God and the faith he sings about.

Faith is not an uncommon word today.

If you watch sports long enough you'll see someone holding up a sign in the crowd that says:

Believe.

It's another way of saying "have faith."

This morning we're talking about faith.

Sola fide.

Faith alone.

Not faith that I'll get through a break up (like George Michael sings about)...

Or faith that my team will come back from 3 games down...

But *faith* that grabs onto Christ.

Faith that holds onto God's grace.

Justification through faith alone.

Turn with me in your bibles to Romans 3.

Page 1750 in your pew bibles.

People of God here the Word of the Lord.

Romans 3:21-31

²¹But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²²This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished-

- ²⁶he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

²⁷Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. ²⁸For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from observing the law. ²⁹Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, ³⁰since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. ³¹Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

If we boil down the big points of the Reformation...

Distilling the 95 theses...

The 5 Solas...

The conflict between the Catholic Church and the Reformers...

And all of the theological disputes that came out of the Reformation...

If we dump these into a pot and boil them down,

What essentially comes out is this overarching question:

How much do we participate in our own salvation?

What do we contribute, if anything at all?

Up to this point in the sermon series we've been content with our answer to this question:

The first week we looked at Glory to God alone.

God alone receives the credit because God does it all.

He creates us.

He sustains and provides for us.

Then after we fall he restores us.

To God alone be the glory.

Then last week we looked at Scripture alone.

Scripture alone has the authority to speak God's words of salvation to us.

Our eyes have been blinded and blurred by sin.

We need God's Word in order for us to know him and the saving work of Christ.

So far we've said that we don't add anything to our salvation.

We are right with God because *he* has taken the initiative and *he* carried out the plan.

We do not have anything to contribute to our own salvation.

But what about faith?

"Through faith alone."

Doesn't *this* at least belong to us?

I trust Jesus as my Lord and Savior.

I have faith in the Son of God.

I believe everything that God says in his Word concerning Christ.

No, this is also a gift from God.

As humbling as this is, we cannot even take credit for our trust in the Lord.

And it all has to do with our condition...

With our chronic illness.

In order to understand our inability to contribute to our redemption...

We need to understand our sin.

We need to realize how hard and how completely we've fallen.

This is what Paul is doing in chapter 3 of Romans.

He's trying to get the Jews to see that they too are under the curse of sin.

From the perspective of the Jews, they're looking pretty good:

The Jews are the people of the promise.

They are God's chosen people...

God's treasured possession.

Especially when you hold them up next to the Gentile sinners.

The filth and stain of the Gentiles make the Jews shine that much brighter...

Like holding up a white bath towel next to a towel you use in the garage...

The Gentiles make the Jews look that much better in God's eyes...

So they think.

But Paul gives them a wakeup call.

Earlier in chapter 3 he says,

"Are we Jews any better off?"

He of course answers his own question: "No not at all!"

"We've already said that both Jews and Gentiles are under sin."

Paul levels the playing field.

He says that "all people are under sin."

"There is absolutely no distinction."

"When it comes to being stained, we're all dirty garage towels..."

"Those Gentiles *and* us Jews."

"And that Law that you've been trying to live by...

All it does is show you how sinful you really are."

"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (3:23)

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

This verse should poke you...

It should have a convicting sting that gets us all...

"We've *all* come up short of what God expects..."

But we're so used to it that it has lost its punch.

Maybe we should become more familiar with the verses that Paul is referring back to:

Verses 12-18.

This is how Eugene Peterson translates it in the Message Bible:

“There’s nobody living right, not even one,
 nobody who knows the score, nobody alert for God.
 They’ve all taken the wrong turn;
 they’ve all wandered down blind alleys.
 No one’s living right;
 I can’t find a single one.
 Their throats are gaping graves,
 their tongues slick as mudslides.
 Every word they speak is tinged with poison.
 They open their mouths and pollute the air.
 They race for the honor of sinner-of-the-year,
 litter the land with heartbreak and ruin,
 Don’t know the first thing about living with others.
 They never give God the time of day.”

That’s a little more potent.

These words wake us up to *our* reality.

 We too are under the curse of sin.

 Our lives are also like dirty, stained rags.

So *now* we ask the question:

 Are we able to contribute anything to our salvation?

 In our condition, can *we* produce the faith necessary to grab onto Christ...

 The faith that’s necessary to accept his sacrifice for us?

This question really used to trip me up...

 I was getting to that age when I tried to make sense of theology and the Christian faith
 and how everything fit together.

 I understood that grace was from God...

 That salvation was not my own doing but God’s.

 I understood that I was one of those who fall short of God’s glory.

I knew that all I needed to do was believe.

 To confess that Christ was the Son of God and died for my sins.

 Faith alone.

But isn’t grace free?

Wouldn't my faith count as a work that I need to add to the salvation recipe?

And how can a sinner like me even have this belief and trust in God?

It just didn't make sense to me.

Maybe you've been at this point too...

Or maybe you're asking these questions now.

You're wondering if you have what it takes:

"Do I have the necessary faith to accept God's grace?"

"Do I have the right belief?"

"Is God satisfied with the amount of trust I have in him?"

George Michael says, "Well it takes a *strong man*, baby."

"Cause I gotta have faith..."

Like he's almost willing himself to have enough faith.

So we ask, "Is my faith strong enough?"

"Do I grit my teeth and muster up enough faith?"

Most of us have been around the church long enough to know that our works are rubbish.

Everything we try to do to earn God's love is feeble.

We have fallen too far and too hard to bring anything that counts towards our salvation.

The Jews tried to live by the Law:

They were circumcised...

They fasted...

They sacrificed...

They worshiped the one true God...

But it was never enough to keep God's favor.

Like the rest of us, they fell short of God's glory.

We read in verse 24 that we "are justified *by* his grace as a gift."

Justification...

(being made right with God...)

Comes as a gift...

It is grace.

And the way that we grab and hold onto grace is *through* faith.

Faith is the instrument we use to embrace Christ.

It's what keeps us in communion with Christ, our Savior.

But be sure people of God...

Faith is not just another work that we need to do.

Remember, we are too dirty to produce this faith.

It is God who gives us this faith as a gift.

First, he gives us the object of our faith, Christ Jesus...

Then he gives us the ability to grab onto Christ.

What a gracious God!

Article 22 of the Belgic Confession says that:

“For us to acquire the true knowledge of this great mystery...

The Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts a true faith that embraces Jesus Christ.”

It's the Holy Spirit that lights this flame of faith in our hearts.

He kindles in our hearts a true faith that embraces Christ and all of his benefits.

Faith is God's gift.

Former President of Calvin Seminary Neil Plantinga says that...

“Faith is not some do-it-yourself attempt to believe what is unbelievable.”

Rather, “it is an unshakable inner persuasion of the divine grace towards us.”

Faith attaches us to Christ Jesus and his saving works.

And this faith is given to us by God.

God's justifying grace is received through faith alone.

The church around the time of the Reformation did not like this idea of faith alone.

Try to see it from their point of view:

If faith is all that's needed to be saved, then wouldn't that make people lazy?

Why would someone with faith need to do good works?

They could essentially live any way they wanted and still be in God's good graces.

So the church said that there needs to be some good works added into the mix.

Yes, God is the one who makes things right, but we need to participate...

Faith with strings attached.

God's justification...with our assistance.

The Reformers insisted that God makes us right with him by grace alone through faith alone.

And they responded to these questions posed by the church in their day.

Faith isn't just a correct thought.

It's not just an intellectual "yes" to Christ and his sacrifice.

Although it does include that.

Faith as a gift involves our whole being.

It includes our mind and body, our spirit and our emotions.

As Christ is working to redeem all of creation, so the reach of faith in our lives is widespread.

Our attachment to Christ through faith affects all we are and all we do.

Faith first grabs on to Jesus.

We hold onto Christ and his benefits for us.

We get close to Christ through faith...

Close enough to embrace him...

To hug him...

To say "yes" to his acceptance of us.

But then faith *keeps* us attached to Christ.

Through faith we are in a continuous union with him...

In the constant embrace of our Savior.

With this true faith—

Produced in us by the Holy Spirit—

We are led to repentance.

The Spirit makes us aware of our sins and our need of grace.

We are led to admit our lack before our God.

Kristi and I went for a run this week around our neighborhood.

As we were running down the sidewalk we saw a group of guys up ahead.

We figured they were waiting for a bus.

There were about 7 of them and they didn't look like us.

They were younger and had some rap music playing and talking loudly.

We were running with Bailey so we decided to cross the street.

We reflected on it a few days later and realized that Bailey was just our excuse.

They looked different from us so immediately we had fear.

We crossed to the other side of the street because we were uncomfortable.

The Spirit convicted us of this sin of prejudice.

We did not open our own eyes to our sin...

The true faith given to us by God led us to repentance.

With this true faith, fruit is also produced from our lives...

Because "it is impossible for this faith to be unfruitful in us." (BC Art. 24)

We see this fruit in our lives at home...

When you're able to be there for a spouse or friend in need.

You set aside your own desires and own wants in order to listen to them.

The Spirit works the fruits of love and kindness through you.

Or when you get really frustrated with the kids...

Because they're being rotten.

The Spirit works the fruit of patience through you...

And you offer your child healthy discipline...

Helping them to grow in the Lord.

We see this fruit being produced in our work...

When a co-worker comes to us with a serious problem that they're having at home...

We set aside our judgements and offer them words of comfort and hope.

The Spirit works the fruit of peace through you.

Especially in times where we step outside of our comfort zone...

We know that the Spirit is working this true faith in us to produce fruit.

Sisters and brothers, our faith comes to us as a gift from God.

And this faith not only grabs onto Christ...

It works God's purposes of redemption through us.

I'd like to close us out with one, hopefully strong application point this morning.

Pray!

We said earlier that Paul leveled the playing field between Jews and Gentiles.

All people have fallen short of the glory of God.

No one is worthy.

But in his faithfulness God upheld the promises of the covenant.

What the Jews were unable to do because of sin, God did by Christ.

But he opened up the covenant to the non-Jews too.

In his mercy God included those who were far off from him.

He included the Gentile sinners.

He chose to give faith to the Gentiles...

And the Jews found this pill impossible to swallow.

But it wasn't their choice whom God would call.

And it's not our choice either.

We did not choose God...

God chose us.

God will call those whom he will call.

And if it's God who gives justifying grace through faith...

then we need to pray.

Pray for those people the Lord is constantly putting in our paths and on our hearts.

Those people who seem to be so far outside of God's reach might be the ones that he calls next.

It does not depend on how good or bad they are...

It does not depend on the color of their skin...

Or how much money they make...

Plead that God might grant them a saving faith.

We have been given true faith in Christ as a gift from God.

May we be assured of his faithfulness to keep us attached to Christ both now and forevermore.

Amen.