

Romans 3:21-31

Ten years ago, when we moved into our new home I was amazed at how much space we had in our basement. On Monday as I was helping our newly graduated daughter move back home--temporarily I am sure- bringing with her an apartment full of furniture, books, clothes etc, that space doesn't seem nearly as spacious; We have books of every subject down there, as well as 3 bikes, 25 baskets, one large boxing bag; numerous backpacks, at least 4 boom boxes and someone's large collection of baseball cards, hats and other memorabilia; before your next painting project call us-we have paint cans starting from the Reagan administration; not to be caught unprepared we already have Christmas presents for our grandchildren yet to be born, not to mention enough used furniture to start an outlet. Every now and then, we'll put some stuff out on the street for the Vietnam Vets to take, or donate some of our stuff to the annual Covenant School auction but other stuff quickly takes it place. Wouldn't you know in the land of opportunity, that there is now a company in the US with 95 franchises who will come and pick up-for a fee of course- your old furniture, office equipment, appliances for disposal or recycling. Its telephone number is 1-800-GOT-JUNK

And you know what- I know we are not unique! You are probably in the same boat as we are- a house filled with junk. I read recently that Americans had accumulated more stuff in their homes since 1960 than all the stuff that ever existed before then! When the pop culture icon Andy Warhol died in 1987, his 5 story house was so packed full of objects large and small that the artist was down to living in just two rooms. In addition to a mountain of unpaid bills, executors found a pizza and a piece of Caroline Kennedy's wedding cake! What stuff have you got in your house that you just can't get rid of?

The stuff in our homes is a metaphor of how St. Paul wants us to think about our lives; they are full of junk; they need cleaning up; they need to call for help because on our own we can't haul away the stuff that fills our life-past and present.

The apostle Paul recognized from his own life and experience that human life, without exception, is full of life-choking piles of sin-soaked stuff. "There is no one who is righteous, not even one," he wrote in 3:10(quoting Psalms 14 and 53) and then stated emphatically that, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (3:23)

It is well known that the word for sin, hamartia, evokes the image of an archer aiming at a target in the distance. Shots are fired, but the arrows miss- not to the left or to the right, not too high or too low, but drop harmlessly well short of the target.

We're arrow collectors. We hoard these misbegotten adventurers. They pile up, cluttering our lives. Paul even offers a catalogue list of timeless junk that we humans tend to collect and accumulate (1:18-32)-sins, misdeeds, garbage, refuse that piles up so high that it separates us from a relationship with God. Sin limits our free movement, confines us to the corners and margins of life, cuts up off from others and eventually begins to crush our very spirits. We can find ourselves slowly dying a spiritual death in the midst of this God-awful mess.

We realize our condition; we embark on spiritual and moral reform; which only leaves us with more junk as we inevitably fail in our efforts. Our situation, our condition, goes from bad to worse. We are like the people in the car the policemen pulled over. "Sir," he said to the driver, "could I see your drivers' license and registration?" "Maybe I could if I had actually taken a test and gotten one." Then the woman sitting next to him chimed in, "Don't pay any attention to him officer, he's always like that when he's drunk." Then the guy in the back seat woke up and saw the policeman, "Oh, no, I knew we shouldn't have stolen this car." Then there was a knock from the trunk, "Are we across the border yet?" We are in hot water. There is only one solution for our problems. The power of God. Dunamis in the Greek. Dynamite. Explosive. We need- the world needs this power cleaning up our mess, our junk. God's power has been given to this end. God's power has been applied to rid humanity of that which it can't remove on its own and restore it for the purposes for which it was intended.

This action didn't just happen. It was messy. Someone got blood all over himself in the process. Paul writes, "We are now justified by his grace as a gift, though the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith." (3:24-25a). The cost to God? The Cross- a bloody mess. The cost to us? Consider it a gift.

The realization that salvation is for those who accept it by faith and not by works was the inspiration for the reforming impulse of Martin Luther in the early 16th century. When he read Romans 1:17 that the just shall live by faith, Luther formulated his doctrine of justification by faith, the core

doctrine of protestant Christianity; the implications of this biblical truth are so profound it is still difficult for us to accept them.

Justification is a funny word for us today; hard to define really; as I was trying to put it in words I decided to go to the internet to see what it said. One interpretation, quite a modern one, helped. Apparently when you are formatting a page as you are working on a document on the computer you must choose a justification. Usually the computer's default settings will choose left justification. But the user can override that and choose right justification, center justification or full justification. The question is how you want your page lined up.

Because of Jesus Christ, we're lined up perfectly. Not because we got it right but because in and through him on the cross and resurrection, our default settings have been changed from ragged, hopelessly confused, useless and unintelligible, to full and complete justification. Fully lined up with God's intents and purposes.

We are forgiven, cleaned up, scoured, whitened and brightened when we simply put our faith in the power of God through Christ. Our lives can be made new through the power of God's favor-His grace.

However, our justification by faith doesn't mean that we are given a license for spiritual laziness-letting all that sinful junk pile up once again until another cleanup is needed. With salvation by faith in Christ, the faithful obedient one, comes through the spirit of God a desire to please God, to walk in the ways of Christ, to love our neighbor. Such are the ways of discipleship. In his pithy little monograph "Christian Liberty", Luther explains that we engage in good works not to buy our way into heaven, to pile up brownie points with God, not to get to heaven-but because of the work of Christ heaven has already been given to us. Rather they are done freely, spontaneously and naturally out of gratitude to God;

Of course we will continue to stumble-we are after all redeemed sinners. But we're singing a different tune now-no more Volga boatmen; now our song is of the redeemed; surely it is God who saves me; I will trust in him and not be afraid; or as an ancient Syrian orthodox hymn puts it: How fair and lovely is the hope which the Lord gave to the dead when He lay down like them beside them. Rise up and come forth and sing praise to Him who has raised you from destruction." Amen.