

## **What Did We Do To Deserve This?**

Romans 5:1-11

January 17, 2016

So far in January we have thought about why God saves us – not just for our own benefit, but for the sake of the rest of the world that God loves. And we have explored whom Christ came to save – which may extend beyond the people we think deserve to be saved, but that is a freedom that God can exercise and we cannot pretend to understand or control. Today in our sermon series on salvation the question is what did we do to deserve the gift of our salvation – and so as to not keep you in suspense, the answer to the question is “nothing.” Because if we could do something to deserve our salvation then there would be no reason for us to have a savior. With this in mind, listen for God’s word as we find it in Paul’s letter to the Romans. I am reading from the fifth chapter.

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Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.

For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

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At one of my former congregations there was a young couple who had been visiting the church for a number of weeks. They had made some friends, and they were sending all of the signals that they intended to become members – which we were all excited about. And then, suddenly, they stopped coming to worship. After a few weeks went by without seeing them, I called them up, told them we missed seeing them, and asked what happened.

“We love the church and we love the people – really, we do,” the young man told me, “it’s just that you all say that prayer of confession every Sunday. And, quite frankly, we don’t like being told how bad we are all the time. We’d rather go somewhere to church where we can hear good news.”

I’m not certain what I said in response. I think I mumbled something about thanking him for being willing to share his feelings and hoping that they understood our church talked a lot more about grace than judgment. Honestly, my main concern was trying to retain a potential new member – and in that moment I was laboring under the false impression that what mattered the most to someone shopping for a church was whether they got along well with the pastor.

What I wished I had said is something like this:

*We don’t say that prayer every Sunday with the intent of reminding people how bad they are. We say that prayer every Sunday because we are honest. And the fact is, each of us is a sinner, and each of us is in need of saving. Maybe you don’t feel like you have committed any big sins – maybe, compared to others, you feel like your choices have been pretty faithful. But the kind of sin that we talk about in worship goes much deeper than your individual decisions.*

*When it comes to sin, we can’t just look at our own lives, we have to consider the state of the world and then ask ourselves, does this world reflect God’s intent? The gap between what is and what should be is how we measure sin – and we are all a part of why that gap exists, even in ways that we don’t yet understand. So, yeah, every Sunday we acknowledge that things aren’t right – with us, or with our world. And as much as it might feel uncomfortable to do this every week, we think it would be more uncomfortable to ignore our brokenness for the sake of not wanting to feel badly.*

*Because the benefit of being honest with God – and acknowledging that we depend on God – is that we experience the mercy of God and see the evidence of God’s grace. “For while we were still sinners, Christ died for us...”*

*That is good news.*

That’s what I wish I had said...

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*While we were still sinners, Christ died for us...*

If you have been here for any length of time, you’ve probably heard one of the pastors quote this verse from Romans before we read our prayer of confession. It comes from the conviction that, yes, we do need saving. And when we talk about needing to be saved, we’re not only talking about your crazy uncle who thinks that Bernie Sanders is exactly who this country needs to be great again, and we’re not only talking about your sister who thinks that Donald Trump is a diplomatic genius.

When we talk about who needs saving, we're not focused on your wayward adult child who hasn't darkened the door of a church since they were in confirmation classes 30 years ago, and we aren't focused on your bumbling brother who can't hold a job or a marriage. We all need saving. Because we all fall short of God's vision for our lives – and we fall short of God's vision for what our lives might look like in concert with other people's lives.

And yet, *while we were still sinners, Christ died for us...*

We don't do anything to deserve the gift of this grace. But that doesn't make us worthless. Sometimes, I think that is what we are tempted to believe. Maybe this is what the young couple from my former church was pushing against? That because we sin and are in need of saving then we are totally depraved and worthless to God. But nothing could be further than the truth. If we were worthless, then why would the stories in this book tell of promise after promise that God makes to his people? If we were worthless, then why would God send Christ into this world to save?

We are not worthless in God's eyes – we are precious.

That's the point, you see???

We don't do anything to deserve God's grace – we receive God's grace because when God looks at us, he doesn't see a sin-soaked, broken vessel that is far beyond the boundaries of redemption....no – when God looks upon us, God sees someone created in God's image – and someone whom God has promised to love.

And we know that this is what God sees because *while we were still sinners, Christ died for us...*

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Right now, the fourth graders of this church are studying the children's catechism in their Sunday school classes. I know that one of the questions they will study as a part of this class is: why did Jesus have to die?

Many of us, I have come to find out, believe that Jesus had to die because God was angry with the world. So, the logic goes, because God was angry with what the people did, Jesus came to the earth to take God's punishment once and for all in such a way that his death on the cross satisfied God's need to make the people pay for their sins.

That image of an angry God with a thirst for punishment is a powerful one – and a scary one. It is also incomplete.

Another question that the fourth graders will explore in their catechism class is on the subject of the Trinity – what it means for God to be in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And when they study that question, one of the things they will find,

which is both beautiful and extremely hard to understand, is that we cannot separate the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit from one another. It's not that we have an angry Father who punishes a loving Son. Or that we are to fear a big, bad, powerful, and angry God and welcome a sweet, kind, loving, Jesus.

The good news of our salvation is that we belong to a God who – in spite of his anger and disappointment about our sin – loves us enough to lay down his own life for our sake....while we were still sinners.

Do you see the difference?

And this God – this triune God – who created the world and set it in motion – who sustained this world through promises and prophets – who saved this world through suffering and sacrifice – laid down his life for you.

We have spent the past few weeks thinking about salvation – and hopefully by now you have figured out that when it comes to salvation, our church doesn't believe we get a lot of choice in the matter. The choice belongs to God – and we live our lives and practice our faith in the sure and certain hope that God has made a gracious choice when it comes to us.

Our decisions, then, center not on whether we will choose to be saved, but on who we will choose to trust. Who we will choose to follow. In whom we will choose to have faith.

And in the world we live in, there is a lot of competition. Work. Money. Success. Expectations. Power. All of these compete for our allegiance. Our trust. Our priorities.

But ask yourself –

Would the company or the firm or the practice lay down its life for you?

Do your stock options hold the power to grant everlasting life?

Is your reputation built on your intrinsic worth as a person, or is it built on what value you bring to the bottom line?

Of all the things we might be tempted to worship, there is but one God who saves. And that God loves you.

So much so that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

So rejoice in that love.

Boast in that love.

Respond to that love –

by living differently...in ways that honor the image of God in all the people that you meet.

And always remember that living this way is not how you deserve salvation.

It's how you say thank you.