

Romans 3:21-25a, 27-28

²¹But now, completely apart from the law, a righteousness from God has been made known. The Law and the Prophets testify to it. ²²This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all and over all who believe.

In fact, there is no difference, ²³because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God ²⁴and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God publicly displayed as the atonement seat through faith in his blood.

²⁷What happens to boasting then? It has been eliminated. By what principle—by the principle of works? No, but by the principle of faith. ²⁸For we conclude that a person is justified by faith without the works of the law.

There Is No Difference

I.

Categories. We love them. We try to pigeon-hole people into various categories all the time. Sometimes our categorizations are relatively harmless—they just recognize the various talents and abilities out there in the world, take note of them, and praise them. This one is a good basketball player. That one is an incredible beauty, filled with style and grace. Another is really intelligent. Still another shows artistic talent that seems almost other-worldly.

Then, suddenly, the categorizations take a darker turn—toward the derogatory. This one is ugly. That one has a complete lack of talent. That one over there is just an awful human being.

With the darker categorizations come the comparisons. Paul says in our lesson: “There is no difference, ²³because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:22-23, EHV). But there *are* differences, aren’t there? We can *see* them. We notice.

Sure, all people fall short of the glory of God, but some people are pretty good people. You know the type. They stand up for the little guy. They seem to always bring out the best in other people. They have a sunny disposition and they’re just wonderful to be around.

Then there are others. All people fall short of the glory of God, but some people fall *really* short. That’s why there are prisons. You don’t go to prison unless you have done something truly *awful*. There are pretty obvious differences.

Since we are so good with categorization, most of us think we probably fall somewhere in the middle of the “goodness” scale. Perhaps we aren’t paragons of virtue, but we are decent people. Maybe we’re not always model citizens or the most wonderful people to be around, but you won’t find us handcuffed in the back of the squad car, waiting for booking, either.

II.

Jesus once told a parable about the categorizing people engage in (Luke 18:9-14). The parable was about two very different individuals. One of the two was a well-respected member of the community; he was seen as a model citizen. He considered *himself* to be a model citizen. He was proud of his status in the community. The other man was someone who was considered reprehensible by nearly everyone. He was seen as a liar and a notorious cheat.

Each of these two very different individuals had gone into the temple to pray. One

prayed a prayer praising God and praising himself for what a wonderful human being he was. He said: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector” (Luke 18:11, EHV).

The tax collector the pharisee referred to was the other fellow in the parable. As Jesus told it, the second man did not consider himself worthy of looking to heaven. His prayer was: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13, EHV).

In Jesus’ parable, it was the bad guy who was justified before God, not the good guy.

What were people to learn from the parable?

Our comparisons and our categorizations don’t really work very well, do they? “There is no difference, ²³because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:22-23, EHV). The standard of comparison isn’t supposed to be some other human being. If you are going to examine a person’s morality—and you should start with yourself, not someone else—the standard of comparison is supposed to be God. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of *God*.

You are immoral. I am immoral. We fall far short. Whether you have gone to prison or not, whether you think you are a paragon of virtue or just an average Jane or Joe.

Remember the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector? The preface of the parable says this: “Jesus told this parable to certain people who trusted in themselves (that they were righteous) and looked down on others” (Luke 18:9, EHV). When we categorize—that is, when we look at ourselves and try to make ourselves feel better about our own position compared to others—we trust *ourselves*, and think we are righteous.

Paul starts today’s lesson by saying: “But now, completely apart from the law, a righteousness from God has been made known” (Romans 3:21, EHV). Jesus’ parable was designed to get people to take a closer look at themselves. When we look honestly, we realize we aren’t really that admirable. There are flaws. There are faults. These things are called “sin,” and these sins mean that we fall short of the glory of God. No person could ever be called “righteous” by keeping the law. We simply have not done so, nor *could* we ever live up to God’s standard.

III.

Paul goes on to describe the righteousness apart from the law—the righteousness from God. “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all and over all who believe. In fact, there is no difference, ²³because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God ²⁴and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:22-24, EHV).

There is no way anyone could ever live up to God’s standard. There is no way anyone could ever not “fall short.” But there *is* One who did not *ever* fall short. He was born without sin. When *he* measured himself to the standard of God’s law, he *did* measure up. He was completely innocent. Perfect in every way. He *was* a paragon of virtue—in the truest sense of the word. He deserved every accolade—every bit of praise—that could ever be heaped on a person.

Instead of receiving the accolades and the praise, he received punishment. The punishment every one of us who doesn’t measure up deserve—the “all” in our text. Paul says that Jesus is the One “whom God publicly displayed as the atonement seat through faith in his blood” (Romans 3:25, EHV). In the Old Testament, blood was sprinkled on the atonement seat—the cover of the ark that was in the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle and the temple. That blood from a sacrifice pointed ahead to the blood of the only sacrifice that

matters—Jesus. It is Jesus' blood that brings us forgiveness. It is Jesus blood that brings us the righteousness that is from God.

“There is no difference, ²³because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:22-23, EHV). But among us in whom there is no difference, there is a difference. By faith we are made right with God. By faith in Christ, we are forgiven. By faith in Christ, we are no longer counted among those who “fall short of the glory of God.” By faith in Christ we are righteous in the eyes of God.

IV.

Paul concludes: “What happens to boasting then? It has been eliminated. By what principle—by the principle of works? No, but by the principle of faith. ²⁸For we conclude that a person is justified by faith without the works of the law” (Romans 3:27-28, EHV).

We have entered the season of Pentecost. This is that long season in which the green paraments hang endlessly from the altar and the pulpit and lectern. The green is to serve as a symbol of growth in the Christian life. Paul wants us to know that this growth doesn't really take place on our own. It is by faith. Faith is the foundation on which we stand. Faith is the foundation *from* which we are able to live a Christian life and display acts of faith.

Spend the Pentecost season displaying your faith. Grow in Christ Jesus. *Show* Christ Jesus. Show others that there is no difference. Amen.