

“The Privilege of Paupers” Romans 5:1-11, Lent Sunday 2-B, March 1, 2015

In 1996 Christian author Max Lucado wrote a wonderful book entitled **IN THE GRIP OF GRACE** to help every day ordinary people better understand some of the deep theological truths that St. Paul is sharing with us in his letter to the Romans. When he begins to offer his insights to us on these wonderful words of our **epistle lesson today (5:1-11)**, he begins by telling us that he was a single man when he graduated from the seminary and that his first assignment was to serve a church in Miami Beach, Florida. This lovely Christian congregation had the great tradition of hosting a potluck dinner in their fellowship hall every Sunday night following the evening worship service.

Fortunately, he says, this church was perfect fit for him because the congregation was blessed with a good many southern ladies who loved to cook and he was a single fellow who loved to eat. Humorously, he comments, that while the ladies were deliberating on what dish to bring to the next Sunday evening potluck, he was spending time studying the storage technique of camels.

Even though he was a single man who did not know how to cook, he always felt compelled to bring something to those fellowship dinners. So on the Sunday afternoons he'd start rummaging through his kitchen cupboards in the hopes of finding something to bring. One time he remembers taking to the church a half-empty jar of Planters Peanuts. On another occasion he brought six Peanut Butter and Jelly sandwiches, which he himself had made. One of his biggest contributions was that Sunday afternoon when he stopped by the grocery store on the way to church and purchased a large bag of potato chips to share. Oh, don't get me wrong, he had taken a bag of potato chips as his contribution to these Sunday evening dinners before, but this was the first time he ever took a bag of potato chips that had not yet been opened!

Whatever he brought though, the ladies were very gracious in receiving it. He was surprised that even if all he brought was a half-empty jar of Planters Peanuts, or six Peanut Bully and Jelly sandwiches, or a bag of potato chips, those ladies would thank him for his contribution as though he had brought a 20-lb. roasted turkey, cooked to perfection, with stuffing and a bowl of gravy to boot!

Then one of those dear ladies would always take a plate and hand it to him saying: “Go ahead, pastor! Fill up your plate!” And that's exactly what he would do. He would fill up his plate with mashed potatoes and gravy, roast beef and fried chicken. He always took a little bit of everything, except of the contributions he brought with him.

He writes: **I CAME LIKE A PAUPER AND I ATE LIKE A KING!** And he shares this personal story with us as a way of saying that is **exactly what our God does for us in the gift of his Son**, though on a much grander scale! This is really how it is also when we are gathered before the LORD God to read his Word and to come to his Table. It is **not our offering** that affords us a place at the Table at all, for **anything we bring to God would be completely puny and paltry compared** to what God is offering to us! God does invite us to come prepared when we come before him. He wants us to come with a great spiritual appetite as our Lord Jesus remind us in his beatitudes: *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled!” (Matthew 5:7)*

Justification means that we now have peace with God (5:1)

"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ!" (v. 1)

Paul doesn't say that we will be blessed with the peace of God, though that's true too! But here Paul's use of the verb "to justify" is in used in the **passive voice**, reminding us that the **subject of this sentence is not the one who is doing the acting, or has done the action**, but the subject, namely "WE" of this verb are the ones now benefiting from an action that has been taken by God, on our behalf. *"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ!" (v. 1)* SO PAUL IS TEACHING US HERE THAT AT SOME HISTORICAL POINT IN THE PAST "WE" DID NOT INITIATE THIS ACTION, BUT WERE THE UNEXPECTED RECIPIENTS OF THIS ACTION!

Paul is reminding us that ever since our first parents fell into sin and disobeyed God there has enmity that has been a great state of enmity that has existed between our Creator and his human creatures. And that state of alienation from God is still a present reality for many people in the world today!

You remember those words we heard from St. Paul on **Ash Wednesday from 2 Cor. 5:19-21**, *"God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God! For God made him to be sin for us who knew no sin, to that in him we might become the righteousness of God!"*

I read in the newspaper last week that the **President of the United States** together with other key leaders in Washington DC are now hoping to establish a peace treaty with respect to nuclear weapons between our nation and the nation of Iran. But given Iran's history in her relationship with the United States, how trustworthy, would such a peace treaty actually be? **But the greatest peace treaty of all time is the one God has now established with us through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ his Son, when he offered his perfect life as a sacrifice for sin on our behalf on the cross; for which cause we still glory in the cross of Christ today!**

Justification also means that we have full access to God (5:2)

The word that is translated into English here, as "access" is *prosagoge* to name a second benefit of justification. This particular word is used only three times in the New Testament, and every time it is used by the Apostle Paul. Here in **Romans 5:2**, Paul says, *"Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand!" (See also Ephesians 2:18; Ephesians 3:12)*

Each time I turn on my computer, I am asked for a password. If I don't have that password, I go no further. That's the way it is with a human being and with God. If you want to approach the Holy, Sovereign, Righteous God, **you need to know the password to have access to him, and this password is Jesus Christ.** God the Son gives immediate and consistent access to God the Father to all whom God has declared and treats as righteous. Thus, having been justified by faith, we have access to God!

Justification also means that God now gives us **a place to stand before him.** Initially, this may not sound like much of an issue, but if you search the Scriptures, you will quickly find that this is an age-old problem! Listen to **Psalm 130:3**, *“If you O LORD kept of a record of our sins who could stand before you?”* In **Job 41:10**, we read a question that the LORD God puts before Job: *“Who then is he that can stand before me?”* And listen also to the question of the Prophet in **Malachi 3:2**, *“But who can endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fuller’s soap!”*

Zig Ziegler used to point out in his motivational seminars that we all have a tendency to blame our lack of success and our faults on someone else and that’s how it was already in the Garden of Eden. God confronted Adam with his sin, and Adam told God it was the woman; the woman that God gave to him who tempted him to sin and this is why he sinned, in a roundabout way blaming his disobedience on God. The woman pointed to the serpent and said that the serpent was to blame and the serpent; and the serpent, well the serpent didn’t have a leg to stand on!

Justification also means that we live constantly with the hope of Glory (v. 2)

Justification means that God longs to sustain us through life’s troubles with an encouraging hope (5:3-5)! St. Paul says that the kind of hope that God and God alone can give to us *“does not put us to shame”* (v. 5), or as the NIV translates this verse, *“does not disappoint us!”* This word “hope,” of course, confuses many people today! For many people in today’s world **hope is only something that is very nebulous, ethereal and hard to get one’s hands around.** It’s to experience some sort of faint **optimism in the future**, such as when the **soon-to-be bride and the soon-to-be groom** are planning an outdoor wedding and are heard continuously saying: *“We sure hope that it does not rain on our big day!”*

But this is not the concept of hope as it is found in the Bible. Biblical hope is not based on anything we do and is much more than simply our whimsical desires with respect to the future! **It’s something we only have and possess as a byproduct of our faith.**

“My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness, when every earthly prop gives way he still is all my hope and stay. On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is seeking sand. When he shall come with trumpet sound, oh may I then in him be found; Clothed in his righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne! On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand!

Justification means receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit (5:5)

Justification means experiencing the love of God (5:5-8) All of this is the privilege of us paupers: *“For while we were still weak; at the right time Christ died for the ungodly! For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—through perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us! Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God!”* (Romans 5:6-9)

Friends throughout these words of our epistle lesson today, St. Paul's initial portrait of us is not very attractive. Paul reminds us that we were unable to help ourselves! We were living against God's commands! We were by nature sinners and by nature God's enemies, but these are the very kind of people for which Christ died! *"God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us!"* (v. 8)

Family therapist Paul Faulkner tells of the man who set out to adopt a troubled teenage girl. Some of his friends discouraged him doing so, at times, because the girl was destructive, disobedient and dishonest. One day **she came home from school** and ransacked this man's house looking for money. By the time he arrived, she was gone and the house was in shambles. Upon hearing of her actions, friends urged him not to finalize the adoption. "Let her go," they said. "After all, she's not really your daughter!" His response was simply, "Yes, I know. But I told her she was!"

God too has made us his children through the perfect life, death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ to adopt us to be his covenant people, and **fortunately his covenant is not invalidated by our rebellion**. It's one thing to love us when we are strong, obedient, and willing. But when we ransack his house and steal what is his? This is the real test of love! And God passes the test: *"God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us!"* (v. 8)

The ladies at Max Lucado's first church didn't see him come to the potluck dinner with a half-empty jar of peanuts and say, "Come back when you've learned to cook!"

The father didn't look at the wrecked house and say, "Come back when you've learned respect!" Nor does God look at our frazzled lives and say, "I'll die for you when you deserve it!"

Nor did King David look at Mephibosheth and say, "I'll rescue you when you've learned to walk!" In his book **IN THE GRIP OF GRACE** Max Lucado calls to our attention a story in the Old Testament that beautifully helps us understand the true nature of grace; a story that we may be totally unaware of!

Mephibosheth was the son of Jonathan, the grandson of Saul, who was the first king of Israel.

When Saul and Jonathan were both killed in battle, David was anointed as Israel's new king. Sometimes when new kings were crowned that often tried to secure their position by exterminating any living members of the former king's family. **David had no intention of doing this, but the remaining members of Saul's family didn't know this**. Of special concern to them was five-year-old Mephibosheth, for upon the deaths of his father and grandfather, he would have been the presumptive heir to Israel's throne. If David had been intent on murdering Saul's descendants this boy would have been first on the list. So the family tried to flee Jerusalem as quickly as possible. But in **the hurriedness of that escape, Mephibosheth slipped from the arms of his nurse, permanently damaging both of his feet**. For the rest of his life Mephibosheth would be a cripple! **For nearly two decades the young prince lived in a distant land, unable to walk to the king, too fearful to talk to the king. He was unable to help himself**. Meanwhile David's kingdom flourished and under his **leadership Israel grew ten times larger than when David first was crowned as king**.

David and Jonathan were two very close friends. It says in **I Samuel 20:17**, *"Jonathan loved David as much as he loved himself!"* Their legendary friendship met its **ultimate test the day David learned that Saul was trying to kill him. Jonathan pledged to save David and asked his friend one favor in return: "You must never stop showing**

kindness to my family, even when the LORD has destroyed all your enemies from the earth. So Jonathan made an agreement with David (1 Samuel 20:15-16)

One day many years later after David had experienced so much success, we can imagine him reflecting on this moment years later! Were there times when he was overwhelmed with gratitude not only to God but also to Jonathan? Were there times when he thought, **“Had it not been for Jonathan saving my life, none of this would ever have happened!”**? Perhaps such moments of reflection prompted him to turn to his servants one day and ask them, *“Is there anyone still left in Saul’s family? I want to show kindness to that person for Jonathan’s sake!”* (2 Samuel 9:1) One of David’s servants named Ziba knows of a descendant. *“Jonathan has a son still living who is crippled in both feet!”* The king asked Ziba, *“Where is this son?”* Ziba answered, *“He is at the house of Makir son of Ammiel in Lo Dabar!”* (2 Samuel 9:3-4)

Who would have faulted David for saying to himself: “A cripple would not fit well into the castle crowd! Only the elite walk these floors, this young man can’t even walk! And what service could he provide? No wealth, no education, no training. And who knows what he looks like? All these years he’s been living in a place called Lo Debar which is Hebrew for “barren place!” But such words were never spoken. David’s only response was, *“Where is this son”* (v. 4)?

One wonders how long it had been since Mephibosheth was referred to as a son. In all previous reference to him in the Bible he is simply called a cripple. Mephibosheth became synonymous with his disability. Mephibosheth carried the stigma of being a crippled man for 20 years. When people mentioned his name they always mentioned his problem.

David’s couriers journeyed to Mephibosheth’s door and carried him to the chariot and brought him back to the palace. He was taken to the king, where he bows bowed face down on the floor and confessed, “I am your servant” (2 Samuel 9:6). His fear is understandable. Though he may have been told that David was kind, what assurance did he really have? Though emissaries surely told him that David meant him no harm, he was still afraid!

David’s first words to Mephibosheth were **“Do not be afraid,”** the very same words of Jesus to his disciples that are repeated more often by our Lord in the New Testament gospels than any other words; some 27 times.

Mephibosheth had been called, found, and rescued yet he, still needed assurance!

Don’t we all? Don’t we, like this trembling guest, need assurance that we are bowing before a gracious king? Paul says we have that assurance. The apostle points to the cross as our guarantee. **“God shows his great love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us! Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation! (Romans 5:8-11). Amen**