

## 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary time, 11<sup>th</sup> June 2023

The lections for today point us in a direction where I am sure we all have some degree of experience. There is a conflict we all face which is best described as the conflict between law and grace.

We can attempt to see these as reflections of the Old Testament and the New. I think this is seen quite clearly in an Old Testament verse of which I am sure we are all aware. In Genesis 15:6 we find this reference to Abraham, "... he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness."

This Old Testament verse is one of the most often quoted verses by the authors of the New Testament. We find it for example in Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6 and James 2:23. It is part of our reading from Romans this morning: at Rom 4:20-22. Quoting this verse is important because it teaches us about salvation. If you want to be "saved" or, in other words, if you want to know that your sins are forgiven, that you are right with God, and have a home in heaven, you need to understand what this verse is teaching us about being reckoned as righteous.

The Hebrew word we translate as righteousness is "tzedek." It originally meant to be "straight" – to conform to the standard of what is right. So if I want to draw a straight line on a piece of paper, I get a ruler, because I know if I draw a line on my own, it is not going to be straight, it is not going to be right. That is what this word righteous means: to be straight or to be right.

It means first of all to be right with God; it means you are travelling on "the straight and narrow"; doing what God expects you to do. It means that you are right with God. We need to also note that the Bible makes it clear that it also

applies to our relationships with other people. It means that you are straight with them. The Bible speaks of righteous people such as those whose weights and measurements in business are accurate, they aren't cheating in business; they don't show partiality, and they do the right thing by taking care of widows, and the poor. So a righteous person is a person who is straight, or right, with both God and others. How do we match up to that?

If we are honest, we know that we aren't really that righteous. Here I'm not talking about the worst of us; I'm talking about what we would call the best of us; those who go to church, and read their Bibles daily, and tithe what they earn, and give more to special offerings, and serve in various ways in the church — if the truth be known, even the best of us are not all that righteous. We are not right with God; we are not straight with others. We have all failed both God and others in many ways, and we continue to do so — even the best of us!

One of the African saints of the Church, S Augustine of Hippo, knew that he was no "saint." Writing in the 300s about how some people were being critical of him, he said: "What they now criticize in me, they know nothing of. O, there are many things in me which they could fasten on: it would thrill them to know about them! Much still happens in my thoughts — fighting against my evil promptings, a day-long tension; the Enemy almost continuously wishing to make me fall ...". (Augustine, Brown, p. 229)

Basically S Augustine was saying: "They are accusing me, but the truth is, I've got worse things going on in my mind than they even know! I am not that righteous!"

Romans 3:10-12 makes this idea so clear. Speaking about the sinfulness of all humankind S Paul says: “As it is written, There is none righteous, not even one: There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.”

The bottom line, S Paul says, is that none of us is righteous. None of us is totally walking the straight and narrow; none of us is doing everything right towards God and others; none of us will be saved because we are personally so good or so righteous. Just like Abraham, we aren't really that righteous!

Now to spend a moment thinking about the word reckoned. Reckon is not a word a lot of people use that much today. You might hear an older person, someone of my vintage, say: “Well I reckon ...”. The Hebrew word chasab, which in this instance is translated as reckon, means “to think, to account, to consider, or credit.”

We can be helped in our understanding of this word by reading Job 19:15. We find Job saying: “Those who live in my house and my maids consider (chasab) me a stranger. I am a foreigner in their sight.” Job said because of all his troubles and his illness (remember he was covered from head to toe in boils) his servants considered him a stranger. Now Job was not in reality a stranger; but he said they acted like he was one. They treated him as if he was one, even though in reality he was not.

This is what this word reckon means: it means to count something as something else even when it may not really be so.

This reckoning or counting has to do with the grace of God. In almost every situation in which we might find ourselves there is a choice. At the beginning

I suggested that the choices we face can be described as the conflict between law and grace. We can consider nearly every part of our lives as passing through this dichotomy.

As we reflect on life we can say that law is a demand whereas grace is a gift. Law is a legislation of justice from the outside in. Grace is an infusion of life that enables a freedom from the inside out. Law is related to right order. Grace is related to love. Law suppresses and controls the desires of its object. Grace transforms the desires of its object. Law provides a one-size-fits-all limitation. Grace meets people where they are and guides them step-by-step. Law speaks through the application of the letter of the law. Grace speaks through the freedom of the Spirit. Law condemns. Grace justifies. Law brings death. Grace brings life. Law came through Moses. Grace came through Jesus Christ.

We can all live by law. We all know how we can discount other people by applying the law to their lives. In the church we find so many who consider it their life's work to be the gatekeepers. They apply aspects of the law to all those about whom they are a little uncomfortable. If we do this we are setting ourselves up for failure because the Scripture tells us that we will be judged using the same criteria that we used.

If we accept the grace which God wants to give us in Jesus we can know that we will be reckoned as righteous. This is no mealy mouthed "mistakes have been made", but rather a counting as righteous. No matter what our lives have been like through faith we can experience the salvation which God offers in Jesus because God will reckon us to be righteous.

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