

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Galatians 2:15-21

Not The Way I Planned It: Walking Papers and Marching Orders

I sat in the courtroom with his family—his mother and his dad—on this most terrible day of their lives as they heard the girl's mother say awful, terrible things about him, things they would never believe could be true of their precious son. And then the judge's gavel slammed down and his sentence—twenty years—was announced and off he went, in handcuffs, through the back door of the courtroom, the door no one ever wants to pass through.

It had been a long road as the pastor; how much harder for the parents. I had gotten the call and then the visit months before; he's been arrested. Please help us to raise his bail so we can at least help him get ready for prison life. And the congregation, though not everyone—not the judgmental ones who seemed to enjoy the predicament and the smug self-assurance that this could never be their child—the congregation had come through in a big way. All hope of exoneration failed; a plea deal had to be struck, and it was harsh considering the minimal evidence. And so a young man—still only a boy—was off to adult prison and two parents' lives would never be the same. Their lives will never again be the way they had planned it.

Their lives changed, forever. Soon, the young man will come home and face the dual demons of a return to a hard and unforgiving community and the yoke of a label that will follow

him the rest of his life and, still, I think he will find his way. Partly because his parents, mom and dad, have found theirs, volunteering at **the local prison**—not the one where their son was incarcerated, but with men, young and old, in similar situations—doing the work to which Jesus has led them in the greatest trial of their lives. Out of even this, God has found a way to make good happen.

Let's pray together.

Make good happen today, we pray. Lead us, teach us, take us by the hand as we walk into Your word, and nudge us gently-but-firmly as we seek to live into Your will for us. Use us, this morning and every moment of our lives, for the intercession into the lives of those who are lost and let us walk, side-by-side, along the path that leads to life. And remind us, we pray, that in all we say and do, all that we see and hear, in every breath and every moment that takes our breath away, the glory of this time and of these words is Yours, alone. Amen.

I wonder how good I would have to be to deserve the life I am living.

I'd like for us to stop and just think for a moment or two how radical these words were then, when Paul wrote them—how radical they might seem to the people around us today, if they were to hear:

**...we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.
... if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.**

Let's put these words in context; it only gets better when we do. Paul had Peter backed into the corner—yes, that Peter, the Rock-upon-whom-Jesus-is-building-the-church, take-a-few-steps-on-the-water-guy, pull-out-the-sword-and-cut-off-the-slave's-ear, deny-ever-knowing-Jesus Peter—that guy was backed in a corner. Paul had shown everybody that Peter was a hypocrite. You see, Paul had spent the last couple of years taking the Good News to the

Gentiles—the non-Jewish people of the Mediterranean region. During that time, the apostles had gathered in Jerusalem to talk things over, and they had agreed with what Paul was doing; the grace of God through Christ should be made available to everyone, and not just the Jewish people. But then, when Peter came to see Paul at Antioch, Peter had blown it, big-time. Peter had backed away from the Gentiles; he had refused to eat with them because they hadn't scrupulously obeyed the Jewish laws. Paul was upset, and he took Peter to task. And in his letter to the Galatians, Paul told them what Peter had done; today's Scripture followed immediately. Paul wrote that, even though we are Jewish by birth, we know that our justification comes not from obeying the law, but from having faith in Jesus. It isn't that we are good enough that gets us in the right relationship with God and leads to our salvation; it is only because we have faith in Jesus.

How good would we have to be to earn salvation?

There's been a fascinating discussion in the news this week, partly hidden by the stories of politics and of funerals, but still prominent. The story is of the young man—a student at Stanford, a potential Olympic athlete, convicted of a terrible offense against a helpless young woman. His smugness, the judge who clearly showed him inexplicable favor, and his father, who publicly said that his son shouldn't be judged based on twenty minutes of bad behavior in his twenty years of life, so far. The young woman who, so far, has been able to remain anonymous but whose life has, nonetheless, been tragically changed forever. Her life will never be the life she had planned.

We raise our children and, along the way, we try to teach them right from wrong. We make our own plans for their lives, and for our own in relation to them. We draw lines, we set boundaries and we define and determine the consequences, all in an effort to make our plans

become reality. We show mercy and, even when we have to punish we know—children don't understand—we know that it does hurt us as much as it hurts them. But, along the way, we may learn together—parent and child—that there are some actions—they might be mistakes but, more often, they are intentional—some actions for which the consequences are out of our hands. There are mistakes that can't be undone; there are consequences we have no power to commute. Lives can be changed forever; our plans can fall apart, all due to a bad decision, an impulse acted on, a temptation accepted without consideration of the consequences for us and for those around us, without thought for the harm to others. No amount of parental mercy and forgiveness will change the course of what is to come. Bells, after all, cannot be un-rung. Not by human hands, anyway. And so we tell our children to live well-inside the boundaries of the law—to understand that the limits of the law are bounded by a high-voltage electric fence, sometimes fatal to the touch. Keep away from it, we tell them; live by another standard, a better standard, the standard of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. And then we pray they heed our advice.

I like to think of this young man's father as someone other than the ogre he has become in the public's eye. Not because he is right—not in any way, shape or form—but because I want him to be wrong for the best possible reason. I want it to be that he loves his son so much, that he still, when he looks at his son's mug shot on the front page of national newspapers and magazines, instead sees the face of his little boy, that he longs for a world in which the terrible thing that his son has done simply has not happened. He longs for a better yesterday. And so he says, "Wait—look at the other nineteen plus years. This just can't possibly have happened!" I like to think that there is no world—no universe—in which this father blames the young woman

or diminishes the horror of the twenty minutes and the anguish that may be part of her life for as long as she lives. I like to think that this father is simply blinded by his love for his son.

But the bell can't be un-rung. Not by human hands.

Crucified with Christ. If Paul hadn't written it, wouldn't it be just too much to claim, too much to say about ourselves. Crucified with Christ? No way; Jesus is the only One who made that sacrifice, and I am but a beneficiary of what He gave. If I am to say that I am crucified with Christ, must I not also make a sacrifice, a change, a transition? Must I not give up the self I know and exchange it for a new heart that follows in His footsteps? To be crucified with Christ is to die to ourselves—lose the pride, and lose the shame. Let go of the arrogance, but take hold of the assurance. Let die the selfishness; give birth to selflessness.

I thought, this week, of my dad. My father was the long time lay delegate from our home church in New Palestine to annual conference. Back then, the state was divided into two conferences, North and South, and this church as well as the New Palestine church were both in the South Conference. The annual sessions were held in Bloomington, and my dad loved to go and to stay on campus at The Indiana University while he attended. But while Donna and I lived in Bloomington, he stayed with us, instead. And the first year, I went over to the campus with him and we walked around together—Donna and I had been married about two years by then—and as always, the city and the campus were flooded with **young people**—handsome young men and pretty young women. My dad told me—warned me—to toe the line. To keep myself under control. To be faithful to my wife. Never to hurt Donna, whom he had come to love as much as me—maybe more. I was shocked and surprised by the warning, but I remembered. I remember.

It's so easy to stray; I hope I'm not poking a bear right now, not digging into an old wound, but we have to face this truth. Among the bells that can't be "un-rung"—among the

most common—is infidelity. There are mistakes that we can't undo, and this is one of the big ones. Words can't be unheard, wounds can't be unhurt and faith, once broken, cannot be unscarred.

We come before God—each and all of us—sinners. We have broken faith with God, and with one another. Sometimes with the ones who are most precious to us; often with those to whom we have made the most solemn of vows and promises and covenants. We have all committed crimes of violence, even if that violence be, simply, violence against the trusting hearts of those around us. All of us. I have spent hours, recently, with someone whose spouse has strayed; don't look around the sanctuary—it's not anyone here in the church. But the pain, the anguish, the fear that has sprung from this breach of the deepest and most intimate trust—it is impossible to measure or compare. Their lives—this man and this woman—their lives are not, now, and never will be the way they planned it. Never. **Just imagine, though--if we have that capacity to cause pain to one another through our carelessness, our inattention, our thoughtlessness, our straying from the course of how we planned it—how great is our capacity to cause pain to our God?**

And yet here we are, His beloved. Whether we have been imprisoned—behind bars—or held captive by our failure to meet the expectations of the plans we've made, we are God's beloved children.

If justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing. These are shocking words. I suspect that Paul meant for them to shock us. Can you imagine, if Christ died for nothing? If Jesus hung on the cross without a reason, for no purpose? If God came to earth and allowed His own suffering and death, all in vain? Can you imagine that? Everything we know of Jesus' love—a love so great that He gave His life for us, and in such an ugly and merciless

manner—all to no good purpose? If we are justified—brought into line with God—if we are justified by our obedience to the law—then Jesus dies in vain. There is no more powerful message in the whole of the Bible than is conveyed in these eleven words: if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

But, if you believe that we are justified—that, somehow, we are able to be brought in line with God, that we are saved, that we are lifted above the muck and the mire of our sins in this life and, in addition, assured of eternal life when we are finished here on earth—if you have the blessed assurance of which we sing, then you also must know that it isn't because we deserve it. Don't you? Does anyone here deserve the gifts of salvation, in this life and the next? Who here is without sin? Who here planned a sinless life and has managed to live life just the way you planned it? I didn't think so. And, yet, I tell you that you are justified, or could be if only you were to ask, to meet Jesus, to receive His love. Justified—made whole, or nearly so, relieved of the burdens of sin and guilt and shame and, instead, imbued with hope. Not because you've earned it; not because you deserve it. No, we are justified because we have faith in Him. And He truly is the great disturbance in the sea of our complacency.

I can look at you and see that each of you has a broken dream or two—or many—in your background. Maybe your life hasn't gone as you planned it.

The term “walking papers” has its origin in jails and prisons. One's walking papers were the document given to an inmate allowing him to move from one part of the prison to another—sort of a hall pass. Later, the term began to apply to the release document; when a prisoner had served his time, he was issued his walking papers and allowed to pass through the gate, to freedom. Somewhere along the line, though, the term took on other meanings. “Walking papers” became a common label for divorce documents and decrees; get out, and don't come

back. Take a hike; you aren't welcome here any longer. Now "walking papers" also includes the pink slips of termination from employment. You screwed up the job, or you didn't keep up, or we have more workers than we need and we've decided to let you go; here are your walking paper. Well, that didn't go the way you planned it, did it?

Marching orders, on the other hand, had the meaning that might seem obvious. From the general through the colonel and on down would come the battle plan, and each company, each platoon—perhaps, even, an individual soldier—would receive his marching orders—where to go, when to get there, what to do once you arrive. March, now—left, right, left, right.... Strangely, though, even the term "marching orders" has changed so that, now, it is used interchangeably with "walking papers." Dismissal. Notice that you aren't welcome anymore. Get out, and don't come back. **Throw the bums out!** Why have these terms taken on this meaning? Why do we need two expressions to mean the same thing?

Because this has become a throwaway world. Because so many people have become refuse, trash, litter along the road that, for some, seems to lead to success. Competition. A zero-sum game. Winners and, necessarily, losers. Only the strong survive. Don't take my money in taxes—just give me the services I want; nothing for the poor, nothing for the homeless veteran, nothing for the immigrant. What is mine is mine, and I want what you have, too. Make a plan, execute your plan, and climb over anything— or anyone— who gets in your way. Push aside the weak and the weary. Success or failure—nothing in-between.

But that isn't the way we're called to live. We know it, don't we? And it's not just a Sunday idea, either, but a daily, weekly, year-by-year way of life. Paul tells us the truth. We are called not to make a perfect plan and live or die by how we meet the plan; things happen. But **we are called to be and to become—justified. Not by our obedience to the law, and not by how**

we stick to a plan. By faith. We are justified by faith, and not by anything we have done or failed to do. For if justification comes through obedience to the law, then Jesus, the Christ, died for nothing.

Let's pray together.